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MAID ELLICE.

A Novel.

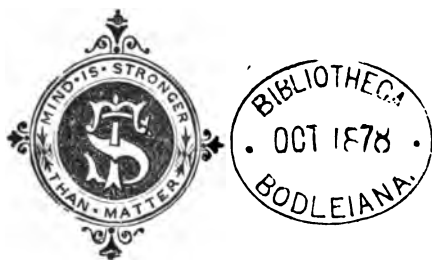
BY

THEO. GIFT,

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"MORE THAN A WOMAN'S LOVE," ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

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MAID ELLICE.



CHAPTER I.

"ELLICE," said the Squire abruptly, "where is that cousin o' thine at present?"

They were all sitting at breakfast, with the summer sun shining in through a network of green vine leaves and gay blush-roses upon them; and the Squire's voice, deep, and sounding as it often did as if he were irritated or angry, made everybody start. Ellice looked up rather bewilderedly. She had been thinking of Lyle Devereux, the cousin she had never yet seen, at the moment, and her answer showed it. The Squire interrupted her more sharply than before.

"Come, come, ye know well enow whom I

mean ; an' as ye keep up a pretty tight correspondence wi' un, ye must know well enow where he is too."

"Gordon !" exclaimed Ellice, wondering more than ever ; for the Squire seldom spoke sharply to her, and the change from "thou " and "thee " was a sign that he was displeased. "Of course I do," she added quickly ; "he is in London, he always lives there."

"I thought even Londoners turned out o' that stived-up city o' theirs in the dog-days," answered the Squire.

And Ellice answered sadly that it was quite true ; but Gordon had given up his own holiday-time to oblige a sick comrade, and now that he was free again the Devereuxs, to whom he had been going, could not have him.

"An' maybe he'd not care about coming here, even if we asked him," said the Squire ; but the tone sounded more good-humoured, and Mrs. Herne smiled as if she had known what was coming all along ; and Ellice, after an eager inquiring glance from one face to the other, almost choked, such a great lump of joy seemed to rise in her throat as she cried out :

"Oh, Squire! oh, auntie! do you *really* mean it—that he might?"

"Faith!" said the Squire, laughing, "'tis easy to see who 'stands near to this maid's heart. Hast really been fretting so much to see him then, child?"

And Mrs. Herne added almost reproachfully: "Why did thee never tell us, Ellie love?"

"Why, auntie, of course I want to see him," Ellice began, lifting her innocent blue eyes in some surprise at the rebuke. She was hesitating whether to go on to say that she had not liked to ask such a favour, when the Squire stopped her.

"Nay, nay, wife; remember what I bade thee, an' never force confidence. The lass is our guest, an' not our child; and so free to say or leave unsaid what she pleases. For my part, Maid Ellice, an' I say it freely, I'd as lief foregather wi' a toad as a Jesuit; an' to speak truth, I dunnot hold wi' papists or papistry of any sort, albeit son Robert pretends as they weren't unknown i' the days o' King Alfred. Howsoever, an' for that matter, there be always vermin in all times an' all parts; an' yet no man need like vermin the

better for that. Likewise 'tis no fault o' yours, bein' foreign born, if the folk ye cleave to come o' a different stock to me an' mine; an' though I dunnot hold wi' crossin' o' breeds in general, least of all wi' inferior stock, still, as I've said, ye be neither chick nor child o' mine, an' if your parents didn't say ye nay, 'tishn't my place so to do. Therefore, an' you'll say 'tis so, why so I'll take it; an' you may write an' bid him welcome here an' you will."

Now, although Ellice spoke English as well as many English girls, and understood it equally, I am bound to observe here that when the Squire launched out on one of his long speeches, delivered in the broadest dialect, and impeded by the fact that he continued to take in his breakfast at the same time, it became intelligible to his ward at the rate of about one word in ten; and on the present occasion she looked so puzzled that Mrs. Herne put in :

"Father only wants to be sure, love, that my brother, as your first guardian, an' knowing your poor mother's wishes, would approve," and on Ellice answering eagerly in the affirmative, she was made happy by being told to write and ask Gordon to run down and spend

a few days with them at once. Robin, as Mrs. Herne casually remarked, was not coming home, after all, before he went to Scarborough, and so the visitor could have his room.

"'Tis the best time for his coming indeed," said the Squire, who, directly the question he had himself mooted was settled, had assumed the mournful air of a man injured by some cruel necessity, "for I mun be out i' the fields all day an' every day till the harvest's gotten in; and shanna be i' the way o' th' yoong man; but thee must tell him, Maid Ellice, not to try any proselytisin' on Maggie an' the serving-wenches. He can proselytise the fowls an' pigs an' he will, but nout else, nout else in house o' mine."

And Ellice only laughed in answer. She had not come to the age for laying any material weight on differences of creed; and was indeed divided at that moment between pleasure at seeing her favourite idol and sorrow that Robin would not be back to see him too. She was so fond of Robin; the house had not been like itself since he left; and what a pity that that horrid visit to Scarborough should take him away at this time of all others! They would have been

sure to like one another, she thought within her innocent heart, not having the shadow of an idea that it was to avoid young Maxwell that Robin was staying away; and that, though a manly, generous impulse had made him go to his father, and himself suggest and press upon him the duty of not separating the cousins any longer since he had found out how Ellice's heart yearned after the proscribed one, he had felt it so impossible to stay and witness the meeting between them without a betrayal of his own feelings, that he resolved to stay away as long as ever he could, and try by change of scene and faces to get over his disappointment before being again brought in contact with the girl who had been the occasion of it.

The fact was that Robin had been gradually getting fonder and fonder of his father's ward without being aware of the extent of his own feelings, until they were revealed to him by the burst of wrath and jealousy with which he received the revelation of her own affection for Gordon Maxwell; and the blow fell all the heavier for its unexpectedness, and the suddenness with which it crushed all his own hopes in the very strength and vitality of

their blowing. Accustomed to the reserve of English people in general, and forgetful of the wide difference made by Ellice's unusual training, he took it for granted that she would never have expressed her love for Gordon so frankly unless she were actually and formally engaged to him ; and on that assumption he spoke to his parents. After all, I think there was a great deal of good in poor Robin, and that it showed, as, if there is any in a man, it generally does, in his love for the girl who had won his heart only (as he felt in his first chagrin) to wound and wring it. It was a true love he felt for her ; for even in the midst of that wrath and chagrin he felt almost inclined to admit the superiority of his unknown rival from the very fact of the latter being preferred before him by the young girl of whom, with all his conceit, he honestly believed himself to be utterly unworthy. She was so true, he said to himself, so frank in her speech, so noble in her ideas. Of course he had seemed a petty and contemptible thing in her eyes, and she had a right to tell him so ; she who was so sweetly bearing an apparently indefinite separation from her lover, at the mere caprice of the father to whose wishes *he*

paid so little attention. But things should not go on in that way; if she would not make *him* happy she could not prevent his making *her* so; and perhaps if some day she found out that she owed it to him she would own he was not as selfish as she had thought. It was not every man who would leave the field himself, in order to pave his rival's way to it; but, after all, she deserved to be happy, and it was something to have a hand in making her so.

Poor Robin! if Ellice had only guessed with what a heavy heart he rode away that day, she would have regretted his absence even more than she did now.

She had another cause for uneasiness, however, before evening, though of a more undefined kind, which drove the heir of the house out of her memory for the time being.

They were all sitting out on the lawn after tea, enjoying the coolness, and occupied in entertaining Miss Pelter, who had dropped in to pay them a visit, when the little old maid suddenly broke off in her prattling gossip with Mrs. Herne, and turning to Margaret, exclaimed:

"But, by the way, my dear Miss Margaret,

I've never asked you—I hope you were not much frightened by that horrid man the other day."

Everybody stared and looked at Margaret, for no one had heard anything of her being frightened at all; and the Squire burst out:

"*Man!* what man! Domn his bones for him! an' how is't that I've been told ne'er a word of it till this?"

"Because I never heard of it myself," said Margaret, shortly and roughly. Her face had grown crimson, and she held her head very high, with an angry sort of flash in her eyes. "Some one must have been making game of Miss Pelter."

"Oh no, indeed, my dear," said the good lady, rather put out by the contempt in Margaret's tone. "No one would be so impertinent, I assure you. I mayn't be a very grand person in the parish—I don't say I am, though my dear papa's second wife was a niece of Sir Peyton Gosling, of Gosling Hall; and I've been there once myself, and everything in the best style—footmen in livery, and with" (dropping her voice modestly) "*with calves!* which, though one ought not to mention such things before gentlemen, are

not seen every-day in these times ; but as I was going to say, it was our good friend Mrs. Mills herself saw the man following you ; and very anxious, she told me, she was because of not being able to get to you."

"Mrs. Mills has been dreaming," said Margaret boldly, "for no one has followed me, and I have not been within sight of her or her house, for a month."

"No, my dear, no ; just so ; but it was she was in sight of you," persisted Miss Pelter, while the Squire looked on, growing gradually purple with wrath, which was only being pent in till he knew on whom to expend it. "And it was about five o'clock on Monday. She was feeling a little stronger that day (you know how ill she has been, dear Mrs. Herne), and had gone out for a turn in the pony-chaise with little Billy Larkins to drive ; and coming down East Hill, between Gossett's land and the common, she saw you in the lane at the bottom of Gossett's, and a strange man alongside of you. At first she thought it might be a new acquaintance—he, he, he ! one of Mr. Robert's college friends, you know ; but when she asked Billy if he knew if any one was staying at the Croft, he up and said no, and

that that person wasn't a gentleman at all, but just a fellow who'd been loafing about the place for a fortnight or more (you'll excuse my quoting Billy's unpolished mode of speech, ahem !), and he said he was sure the man was following Miss Margaret ; for it was a way he had with all the girls about ; and he had nearly got thrashed by Giles Jannin for making love to his wife under pretence of wanting to paint her. Indeed Mrs. Mills got quite alarmed about you ; for she saw you speaking to him as if you were trying to send him away ; and she wished she could have gone to you ; but it's a long round for the carriage, and she couldn't send Billy across the fields on account of not being strong enough to hold the pony in case it *should* try to run away or kick, or do anything dreadful ; so she made the boy stand up on the seat to look after you, and he said you were just turning into the lane at the bottom of your own orchard ; so then she knew you were sure to be safe. I only hope you weren't frightened ; though indeed we all know what courage you have, going about everywhere alone as you do."

"My courage was not called in question that day, at all events," said Margaret, check-

ing the Squire just as his self-control was giving out, and, facing round on her interrogator with the look of an animal at bay, her mouth set like a rock, her body drawn rather back, with her head put forward, and the light in her eyes harder and more glittering than usual. "Mrs. Mills' sight must be going, for, whoever else she saw, it was not me. I was not even out at the time she speaks of, but sitting quietly here in the arbour, as Ellice can tell you. We went in to tea together afterwards, don't you remember, Ellice?"

And then Margaret looked at Ellice. If ever the latter girl read an entreaty in any pair of eyes she read it at that moment, and the consciousness that it was so, made her so uncomfortable that she hardly knew how to answer. To her great relief Mrs. Herne gave her no time to do so.

"Aye, now I mind the two lasses coming in together from the garden; for Robin had gone out to tea, an' they were a bit late, an' the master was put out. Mrs. Mills must ha' mistook the girl; but dear heart! Miss Pelter, you gave me quite a turn for the minute; for though I know there be plenty o' tramps about at harvest time, I didn't go to think they'd

have the brass to trouble *our* girls ; and Margaret, she's al'ays fond o' rambling about alone like."

"Then she'd better break her o' her fondness an' that straight off," cried the Squire, glaring at the whole party till Miss Pelter shook in her black stuff shoes, "for I'll not have it. Dost hear, Madge ? I'll not have thee go tramping off by thyself when there's Robin an' Maid Ellice to company thee. 'Tis all very well that thou wast safe at home *this* time ; but it might ha' been otherwise, it might ha' been otherwise ; an' don't thee stir out walking alone again, wi'out it be to the village. Why, I've seen this very chap myself : a vulgar, half-bred fellow, dressed like a mountebank, an' wi' cheek enough for the devil."

"La ! Squire," cried Miss Pelter, bridling all over, "you don't ought to speak of the powers of darkness as freely as that. Remember what dear Mr. Calthorpe tells us, that he is always walking round the earth seeking whom he may devour !"

"Then let un walk, ma'am ; let un walk !" roared the Squire so loudly that Ellice saw the faded green bow on the top of the spinster's hat give quite a little jump. "A fine thing if

London riff-raff be to come down here poking impudence at our wives an' wenches ! Giles Jannin told me about him ; for t'other day the men were eating their victuals under the hedge and he comes to me and says :

“ ‘ Master, I aren't brought ma dinner wi' I. May I run home an' get'n wi' ma wife ?’

“ ‘ Why, I didn't know ye had a wife, Giles,’ says I.

“ ‘ Noa, master,’ says he ; ‘ but I were spliced to she afore sarvice time yesterday, I were ; an' she's but a yoong wench, an' a bit lonesome,’ says he, ‘ for she cooms from furrin parts down to Biggins-yallows, 'liven moile from here ; an' aren't niver been i' this part afoor.’

“ Sure enough I let him go ; though I bid him be back sharp to time, for my corn had to be gotten in, wives or no wives ; an' later on i' the day when I saw him I said :

“ ‘ Well, Giles, how didst find thy bride ?’

“ ‘ Wull, master,’ says he, ‘ I foond 'er, an' I were back to toime ; but I didn't half like un, an' I've had to bring the door-key along o' I into the bargain. What d'ye think I foond i' the houseplace when I got there, master ?’

“ ‘ What’s at the bottom of all evil, Giles,’ said I, ‘ a woman !’

“ And you’d ought to have been ashamed to say it, father,” put in Mrs. Herne. “ Where would *you* be wi’out your own womenfolk ?”

“ Where I be, Maggy, where I be,” retorted the Squire ; “ an’ wi’ a sight more money in my purse ; but let me go on. ‘ Noa, master,’ says Giles, ‘ not an ’ooman, leastways by ’erself, but a yoong man, dang him ! a zittin’ on th’ end o’ ma own table, starin’ i’ ma wife’s face as free as iver you please ; an’ a talkin’ as if he’d known she iver since ’er weanin’ ; tellin’ ’er as ’er were that loovely i’ the face he mun be ’lowed to zit awhile an’ dror ’er. . . . Loovely ; Dang un ! I coom in quiet like ahind un, an’ zays I, “ Mister, I’ll tell thee soomthing else that’s loovely aside ma wife’s face,” says I, “ and that’s the knob o’ thick big stick o’ mine,” zays I ; “ and if thee dawn’t take thy damned impudent mug out o’ this hoose afor another minute,” zays I, “ thee ’ll no be minded to zit down anywhere for a week to come ; thee ’ll be that sore i’ the bones an’ buttock o’ thee,” says I.’

“ An’ well said for Giles, too, as I told him,” added the Squire. “ It seems the fellow is a

play-actor or painter or summat o' that breed, and just hangin' round these parts ; and Giles found out he'd a lodging over at Mitching on the other side o' St. Anne's Hill."

With which, and a few more threats directed against any individual of the sort who dared to address or annoy any of *his* family, the Squire finished, having however changed the subject from Margaret's nominal adventure ; and the conversation being turned into other channels, soon flowed on in the usual stream of village gossip.

The uncomfortable feeling, however, remained in Ellice's mind. It never would have arisen but for that look in Margaret's eyes ; but once there it would not go away, and set her thinking of the evening referred to, the day before Robin went away, the day—yes ! when she had cried herself to sleep under the apple-tree, and been woke up by a man's voice arguing something with Margaret. . . . No, that had been a dream, for Margaret said she was at home all the time ; and yet how strange that the dream-voices should have seemed to come from the very lane in which Mrs. Mills had seen the supposed Margaret and her attendant ! She

was not suspicious. Very candid-minded people seldom are ; and she had been brought up in too clear and liberal an atmosphere to contemplate the possibility of manœuvring or intrigue in any companion of hers, or girl of her own class ; but she had a vague, uncomfortable feeling, and a trifling incident that occurred later on did not help her to dissipate it.

The two girls walked back to the village with Miss Pelter when she left. Margaret had slipped away from the party some few minutes beforehand ; and after leaving the old maid at her own door, she said abruptly that she had a letter to post, and walked on with Ellice to the post-office. In drawing the envelope from her pocket, however, either her hand shook or she was clumsy, and it fell to the ground. Ellice picked it up and saw (she could not help it, as Margaret's handwriting was unusually large) that it was addressed to " — Gerrant, Esq., 9, High Street, Mitching." It was only a few minutes back that she had heard the name of that village for the first time, or else it might not have struck her. As it was she said innocently :

" Mitching ! Isn't that the place where

Giles said that horrid man lives? I never heard of it before."

"And what if you did not?" said Margaret, almost snatching the letter from her, while her dark face glowed with a sudden anger which took her friend completely by surprise. "What do you mean? May I not have friends without your hearing of them? I tell you what it is, Ellice, I will not be spied upon or interfered with by anybody, least of all by you."

"But I do not wish to interfere with you," said Ellice, with some dignity, though her face showed her astonishment. "Why should I? I do not even understand you, Margaret."

And Margaret, rather ashamed of her violence, muttered something like an apology. She was even rather affectionate to Ellice for the rest of the evening, and talked about Gordon's coming with a cordiality which she had not hitherto shown, and for which Ellice felt grateful to her.

Margaret was always odd, and, after all, why should she not have friends in heaps of places that Ellice had never heard of?

CHAPTER II.

"AND you are sure she will say nothing?" said Gerrant anxiously.

It was not the first time, by very many, since the day when they sought shelter in the doorway of the old ruin, that he was keeping an appointment with Margaret Herne ; but it was the first time that the appointment had been made for after dark, and it was of her making—a circumstance which rendered both somewhat nervous and embarrassed.

"She has not done so yet, so I don't suppose she will," said Margaret, "unless when her cousin comes. He's a Jesuit, you know ; so, if she tells him, we are not safe an hour. I never thought of that till this morning, and I've felt quite queer and sick ever since."

"That is because you are not as wise as you are good-looking," said Nino, without much respect. "A Jesuit ! What is a Jesuit !

You say it exactly in the tone of a last century romance writer. Do you mean a Roman Catholic priest? If so, it is unlucky, for they're a deuced deal too fond of always poking their noses into other people's affairs, though I've met one or two abroad who were jolly fellows enough."

"No, I don't think—I know he is not a priest," said Margaret, a little abashed under the sense of ignorance rudely thrust upon her. "I have heard Ellice speak of him as a civil engineer; but she is very fond of talking about how frightfully good he is, and I believe she tells him everything."

"A civil engineer! Then how the deuce could he be a Jesuit?" said Nino, more rudely than before. Then, as another thought occurred to him: "You call him *her* cousin! I thought he was yours too?"

"So he is, my first cousin too; but I have never seen him."

"And she knows him well, is in love with him, in fact?"

"She is in love with him, certainly," said Margaret, laughing a little; "but as to knowing him—she has not seen him for nearly six years, since he was sent home to school."

"Not since she was a mere child, then?"

"And he too. Yes."

"And you talk of their being in love! My dear girl, if they are, the passion must be more purely platonic than I, for one, am able to imagine. Make love to him yourself, *belle Marguerite*. He can never withstand those eyes of yours; and then you will have him on your side from the first, and deaf to anything she can say."

"Make love to him! *I*? Is that what you advise me?" said Margaret, in a low tone, conveying much secret resentment. Gerrant looked at her, took one of her hands and kissed it, laughing lightly.

"Yes, for, having advised it, I should know it to be a still more platonic sham than the other; and, besides, *I* should not be there to look on at it. I don't think, you know, I could stand doing that, even if I knew it to be a sham; but I can't realise your caring for—for an ordinary sort of man."

Margaret raised her eyes to his, a strange look, half fierce, half wistful, struggling in them.

"Is it anything to you whom I care for?" she said harshly; but haughty as the words

were in themselves, there was something under the tone so widely different that Gerrant, albeit somewhat testy at having been summoned to stand in damp grass in a dark corner of a field at ten o'clock at night, was moved thereby to lift her hand again to his lips, and keep it there while he answered in a tone whose softness was even more effective with his auditor than he imagined :

"Is it *not*, Margaret?"

Her retort followed as quickly as the crack of a pistol-bullet on the flash.

"If it is, then, I care for *you*. There!" and drawing back her hand she clasped it in its fellow behind her back, confronting him with dazzling undaunted eyes. "I don't care who knows it either, if you don't; and I would not make love to any other man, even as a sham and at your bidding, if he were an angel incarnate."

"My dear girl!" said Gerrant nervously, and then stopped. He was perfectly aware of the fact, had known it before she did, and taken no small gratification from the knowledge, both as bearing witness to his powers of fascination over the weaker sex, and because the strangeness and beauty, and wild, untamed

nature of this girl had exercised a singular fascination over himself, and disposed him to a certain tenderness for her. She both excited and tantalised him, and he liked to have her with him, and to draw her out, and study her, and paint her in each one of her ever-varying moods ; liked it so well that, at any risk to her, he was determined to gratify himself in it. There was no real danger. He was only there for a little while. Other women had fallen in love with his handsome face scores of times before now, and got cured. It would be the same with her. Probably before another year she would be married to some Downshire clod, with a red face, and twopenn'orth of fat brain exclusively concentrated on draining and manure ; and, meanwhile, it was very pleasant, and gave an unlooked for piquancy to his country quarters.

So Gerrant had reasoned with himself while he merely guessed at Margaret's feelings by the light and shades of her dark face, and the otherwise groundless caprices of her strange disposition ; and so reasoning, he complacently warmed himself at the fire which he had kindled, and which he flattered himself he could keep sufficiently in check not to run the

risk of being scorched by it. When, however, he received her hastily-written note, saying that she *must* see him, that she could not go out, and that the only time at which she could meet him would be between ten and half-past at night, at the bottom of the field where they had already held one hasty assignation on the morning of Robin's departure, he felt instinctively that some combustible had been cast into the fire, and might cause a general conflagration if he did not get at it in time.

Now! —

It had been raining that evening, and the moon was hidden by armies of great, black clouds ragged and broken at the edges, and drifting rapidly over a misty, watery sky, greyly visible in patches between their torn and threatening edges. Beneath this sky, house, and trees, and hedges showed black and indistinct as one of Whistler's weirdest "landscape nocturnes." Only the long grass about their feet threw back a pale refracted whiteness from the moisture still hanging heavily on every succulent blade; and in the centre of it stood Margaret, her tall figure upright and revealed against one of those

paler blots in the sky, her face thrown backwards white and quivering with an intensity of passion, an intensity of yearning like to nothing he had ever seen in any woman's face before, her whole form dilated and palpitating with the force of emotions which had suddenly come to a head and found an outlet through the parted, trembling lips, the dank masses of her hair falling behind her like a sable rope and bound into the lines of her body by the nervous tension of her two arms clasped behind her—a picture more powerful in its passionate silence than any yet painted by the hand of man, and speaking to every nerve and sense of the artist's impressionable nature like the sudden, opening crash of some divine organ, startling and almost stunning him with the revelation of its power.

The fright spoke first as the coward soul felt the shock of a courage greater than its own, and breaking through all his flimsy webs in that fierce avowal; but the man and the painter were yet stronger within him. He could not stand and see the flame die out of her face, "blotted like breath from a glass" by his hesitating remonstrance. Involuntarily he put out his arms and drew her

to him, murmuring as his lips touched hers :

“Do you really? *My* Margaret, my queen!” And then, for a moment, they both stood there, forgetful of the world, and all in or about it, but the mad beating of their own excited hearts. And the breeze sighed like whispering voices in the hedgerow at their back, and the rain, which had begun again, pattered mournfully on their two heads, and ran in shining drops off Gerrant’s shoulders on to Margaret’s breast.

A very slight physical discomfort is often a more effective stimulant in bringing persons to their senses than any moral or intellectual promptings. Gerrant, whose constitution was exceptionally alive to the former influence, shivered and looked up, loosening his arms involuntarily.

“Raining again, by Jove!” he said; “Margaret, you must go in. You will catch your death of cold. Good Heavens!” and he laid his hand on her shoulder; “you are quite wet already.”

“Am I? I don’t care,” she said dreamily, her immense eyes still fixed on his as though held there by some invisible agency.

"But I do," he answered with some impatience. "Do you want every one to guess that you have been out? Go back quickly, and for goodness' sake be careful. What would you do if any one were to find out?"

"*Tell them,*" she retorted, the changed tone of his voice chilling her more than any rain into the outward semblance at any rate of her normal state of sullen doggedness. "I am not afraid—if you are not?"

"And I am!" replied Gerrant with a burst of most heartily-spoken candour; "*for you,*" he added, however, in the same breath. "You don't know the world as I do, my Gipsy Queen, or you wouldn't talk so."

"I shall know it when I have seen it," she said. "I never have yet. *You* are all the world I know."

It was raining faster now, and the quick, pattering drops acted as a check on any enthusiasm which might have been rekindled by the pathetic daring of the girl's words. Gerrant only took her hands and squeezed them in his as he said:

"Hush! you are too perfect to be let go; but I mustn't be so selfish as to keep you

longer. Run back quickly now. I shall see you again soon."

"But where? You know father has forbidden me to go out by myself any more except to the village; and Ellice suspects already."

"Do nothing to rouse her suspicions—confound them!—then; and don't delay now. I will write to-morrow and tell you."

"But not to the house! I never get letters from any one but my brother, and they would notice."

"To the post-office then. You can always get them there. Good-night, my Margaret, and be careful, as you love me."

"I will," she said, as solemnly as though those words were an argument which needed no strengthening; and so they parted, he stepping through a gap in the hedge to the lane where he had left his horse tied to a fence, while she walked slowly and dreamily homewards; and, creeping quietly across the deserted rickyard, with a whisper to the old watch dog who knew her step too well to offer further remonstrance than lifted ears and a keener gleam in the wakeful alertness of his brown eyes, got into the house by the

open scullery window, through which she had made her exit ; and closing it softly behind her glided up to her own room so noiselessly that Ellice, who was awake, and heard the gentle creak of the staircase under her upcoming footsteps, thought it was but the cat, Margaret's one pet, and was not surprised to hear the latter cross her room a moment later and turn the handle of the door.

"I wonder if she would get up from her sleep to let any one but pussy in," was all the thought that crossed Ellice's mind, too innocent as yet to harbour suspicion of evil unless it were in point of fact forced upon her ; and meanwhile Margaret had thrown herself upon the floor near her window trembling in every limb and pulse of her whole body, not from fear of detection but from the excitement of the past interview, the very intensity of which had driven all fear away.

But for Gerrant's command indeed, I doubt if she would have condescended to skulk under the shadow of ricks and farm buildings, or soften the fall of her feet in passing through the silent and sleepful house. To be loved by Gerrant, as in the supremity of her folly

she fancied she was loved, was a matter for pride and joy, instead of shame, with the girl whose hitherto inert nature he had stirred into life.

"*You* are all the world I know," she had said to him; and she spoke the truth when she said it. 'She had *made* him her world, and she could see nothing else but himself in it. She wanted nothing else, neither change, nor excitement, nor town life, nor new people, nor any of the things which for years she had silently yearned for, till her discontent had grown into a morbid craving so intense as to deaden her senses to everything bright and pleasant around her, and she became, as it were, a veritable corpse mouldering in the self-dug grave of its own gloom until the hand of a man touched the clay and the voice of a man said to her, "*Margaret, come forth!*" and straightway her heart leapt up, as though pierced by a galvanic shock, and she awoke.

She awoke *to him!* to him and to her love for him: nothing else as yet! That he loved her also, that he would marry her, and take her away from this green prison of her birth-place to his own home in London and the new sights and scenes of which he had so often

spoken to her, telling her, what she felt already, that she was born to enjoy them, not to moulder away in the stagnation of this ancient farmhouse, were one and all merely the component parts forming the natural sequence of that love. She never even thought of doubting his love, or of being surprised at it. The intensity of her own passion glowed with too white a heat not to make all connected with it appear of the same colour, even without the honeyed words and outspoken admiration which, while waking the flame in her own heart, appeared—God pity her ignorance!—to be but the expression of the affection which had found its answer in herself.

Her thin muslin dress was wet through. Her feet were wet too ; yet she made no effort to change the one or dry the others. She was not conscious of them as she sat upon the floor making a damp circle with her clothes upon the snow-white boards. Once or twice she lifted her right hand, the one he had kissed, and pressed it against her heart ; or stroked it in a sort of wondering tenderness with the other. Once or twice she touched her burning lips ; and each time a smile, like none ever seen on Margaret's face before,

passed over them. Once she said his name out loud, and stretching out her arms as though appealing to him ; and in all this no thought of her father or mother, of the home of her childhood, or the one brother she possessed, ever crossed her mind.

He had come to take her away from them, and that was enough. In her present excited state it almost seemed to her as though her whole life had been but a waiting for the one fact of his appearance, a growing up to it, a state of abeyance like that of the souls in limbo—necessary, but not even to be remembered now that it was passed.

How was it possible indeed for her to remember her homely title of “Our Madge,” now that she had once heard herself called, “My Margaret, my queen !”

Gerrant meanwhile had got upon his horse and ridden homewards in a very different mood : a mood compounded of a certain amount of elevation with a large proportion of annoyance and embarrassment. The annoyance certainly predominated ; and more than once he muttered :

“What did she mean by being such an idiot, hang her !” in a tone which, could Margaret

have heard it, would have fallen like a bar of ice upon her throbbing heart.

"The next thing will be that I shall find myself in a regular mess ; and all through her folly, when I might have got all I wanted without any bother at all if I had known who she was from the beginning."

To speak the truth, it was primarily Margaret's fault that the first sitting had been repeated, and originated simply in her description of her father as "a farmer." Of course Gerrant soon found out, not only Squire Herne's real position, but also the proud and irritable disposition of the old gentleman ; but in the meantime the mischief was done : for while looking on his eccentric model merely as the daughter of some neighbouring yokel he had no scruple in making appointments with her and treating her with a freedom which he would not have dared had he known her parentage and station.

She was wonderfully handsome, utterly ignorant of the world, and, though "lots above her class," as he in his ignorance expressed it, was quite ready to throw herself at his feet, or fall into any of his suggestions ; and as he saw no harm in either winning the affections or

compromising the good name of a girl of the people, he was quick to seize on the fact that she had kept their first interview a secret and to insist on the necessity of the future ones being equally so : a necessity purely selfish in the first instance ; more binding on her than on himself in the latter ones.

To have this black-eyed and stormy-browed maiden at his beck and call, to fool and flirt with, was very pleasant ; but suppose that the rough grazier who might call her daughter were capable of taking such a coarse view of the amusement as to suggest the alternative of marriage with his penniless and unmanageable daughter *vice* the "loovely thick stick" Giles Jannin had already introduced to his notice ! These country louts were so very coarse in their way of looking at things ; and Gerrant objected about equally to matrimony or thrashing.

But to entangle a gentleman's daughter in a *liaison*, to engage her affections and involve her in imprudences with no end or intention but his own gratification, was, as he knew, a very different matter ; and one which, if found out, might result in making the neighbourhood (a decidedly good and unhackneyed one for

artistic purposes) too disagreeably hot to hold him. The discovery of Margaret's standing was indeed a most unpleasant shock to him; for when it occurred he had not only gone too far on his previous tack to permit of his making her acquaintance in more formal style; but had unfortunately met and exchanged an angry word or two with the Squire himself on the subject of trespass.

"If I had only known it from the beginning," he said to himself irritably, "of course, I should have managed differently, should have made the old man's acquaintance cap in hand, and by admiring his confounded old barn of a house got invited inside, and probably become as intimate with *la belle Marguerite*, and painted her portrait in a dozen different styles, with twice the ease and half the risk of the present state of things. What the devil made her play the rustic with me! And yet then I used to laugh at her duchess airs, and wonder where she got them from, and think she might do worse—d—— it all!—than take to the model trade for her bread-winning. I suppose it's more flattering to me as it is; but it isn't fair on a man, and its deucedly inconvenient, and like living on the edge of a volcano.

What am I to do now, I wonder? It would be an awful loss to me not to have one more sitting for that picture, and yet—I believe the wisest plan would be to make a bolt of it. I was a fool to get her to come to the studio; but what *can* you do when a girl like that throws herself at your head; and now it's harder than ever."

And Gerrant kicked his heels into the horse's sides, and rode on under the blue starlight and over the blackened moorland with a brow as furrowed as his plans. He was painting Margaret now as she appeared to him flying across the heath for shelter on the day of the storm: a picture which, under the title of "A woman of Glencoe," would he fancied be grand enough to pave the way to an A.R.A.-ship; and which an interruption to the sittings in its present stage would entirely spoil. He was certainly not at all disposed to accept *that* alternative; and yet, after to-night, would he be safe in continuing the intimacy with a girl so utterly ignorant of the world and regardless of feminine *convenances* as the one whom he had so lately held in his arms at the bottom of her father's field?

"If I had only not been such a confounded idiot as to suggest her coming to the studio," he muttered to himself with angry impatience, "I shouldn't wonder if some one had seen her after all."

And he was right. His present studio, an unused coach-house at the bottom of his landlady's garden, was screened off from the house by a row of young fruit trees, and had a separate entrance of its own, by aid of which he had hoped that the coming and going of any particular model might not be specially noted; and though it was half in joke that he had first pleaded with her that one half hour of her there would be more use to him than a dozen hasty out-of-door sittings, her evident desire to acquiesce had made him more eager in combating her objections, and more warm in his gratitude when she suddenly turned round and consented.

But the visit had not passed unseen. There are few things that do in a country village!

CHAPTER III.

"A BAD feverish cold and a good deal of inflammation, nothing worse," said the doctor; "but keep her in bed for a couple of days, Mrs. Herne, and see that she takes the remedies I have ordered. It's just as well you sent for me at once; for I can tell you it might have been serious if not taken in time."

It was the day of Gordon Maxwell's arrival, and there was no little stir and upset at the Croft; but, though the advent of a visitor from London was sufficient of itself to produce that in the quiet household, the fact that Margaret was ill in bed, Margaret, whose strength of limb and constitution were by-words in her home, was a still greater cause for excitement and even extended itself to the Squire, who had steadily ignored the previous one.

The girl had striven to get up as usual in

the morning, and, despite a burning head and aching limbs, to drag herself into her clothes ; but a groan of irrepressible pain betrayed her. Mrs. Herne was passing her door at the moment ; and once an anxious mother was inside, further effort at concealing the terrible cold she had caught on the previous night was impossible ; and Margaret had to submit to be bundled back into bed and wrapped up in blankets while the doctor was sent for. As Mrs. Herne in her innocence observed, it was a wonder the girl hadn't caught her death, sleeping with her window open in all that pouring rain. Why, it must have been coming in all night, for there was quite a damp patch on the floor, and as to her dress and petticoat, which had been left on a chair near the window, they were as wet as though they had been dragged through a pond. And Margaret offered no denial or explanation, but only muttered that she was quite well, and could get up at once if she might : a statement her uncontrollable shivering and oppressed breathing contradicted too absolutely for argument.

To tell the truth, the girl was feeling half maddened by the annoyance of being suddenly

confined to her room at the very moment when she most wanted the use of all the wits and freedom she had ; and she took it out in snubbing Ellice to a perfectly savage extent every time the latter came in to wait on and attend to her.

And Ellice would so much rather have been altering the folds of the curtains in Gordon's room, or giving for the fiftieth time a finishing touch to the flowers in his vases ; or even wandering down to the gate to watch for the first sign of his arrival, if duty and kindness had not led her instead to the bedside of the captious and difficult invalid.

"I wish you would keep away ; I can't bear to see you going about smiling as if you were delighted to see me laid up here," the latter burst out in one of her fits of irritation.

Ellice turned quickly to her, equally shocked and distressed.

"Oh ! Margaret, you know it is not that. How could you think any one so unfeeling ! If I was smiling it was only because I can't help being happy at the thought that Gordon is coming to-day, and that I shall see him."

"Well, I must say you don't try to hide

your affection for him!" said Margaret, the more bitterly for her secret resentment at having to hide her own passion for Gerrant: she who would have been proud to own it to the whole world if he had let her. Ellice looked at her in very genuine surprise.

"Why should I hide it, Margaret? I think that you, like Robin, hardly understand how near he stands to me, or how——"

"Oh dear, yes; we understand now well enough," Margaret interrupted impatiently. "Wasn't that why Robin asked father to let you have him here? though as you had never told us—but don't talk about him now. Go away, please; my head aches, and I hate having people about me. Do go."

And so ordered, Ellice had no resource but to obey; carrying with her as she went a grateful feeling to Robin for having been, as she now learnt, the cause of her happiness. And yet even now it never occurred to her that it was of *that* that he had been speaking to his mother on the day of his departure; or that it was the cruelty of separating her from Gordon, not himself from Miss Amadrew, which had been the subject of discussion between him and his father.

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He had come to take her away from them, and that was enough. In her present excited state it almost seemed to her as though her whole life had been but a waiting for the one fact of his appearance, a growing up to it, a state of abeyance like that of the souls in limbo—necessary, but not even to be remembered now that it was passed.

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hour or so our hearts seem as it were torn in twain between the agony of happiness we felt so short a while ago, and the agony of happiness we feel ought to be in us now, and which we cannot find ! We *have* the long-lost one. He is by our side, speaking to us, looking in our face as in dreams we have so often fancied him, and wakened yearning that the dream were true ; and yet it seems as if we had him not, as if this actual presence were more a dream than all those bygone visions, and the yearning had swept back upon our own hearts never to be satisfied any more. We wanted that which we lost, and this is something different. The voice that speaks to us may be a pleasanter one ; but it is not his. The face that meets ours may be handsomer ; but it is the face of a stranger. Years have passed, and we have treasured up every look and tone and gesture of the past, that when we meet again there may be no strangeness, nothing which we had forgotten to re-learn. No lost links between the old life taken from us for a while and now restored in all its fulness and integrity ; but everything as it was before, only rendered dearer and more precious by the length of our sepa-

ration from it. We have done this, and behold it is all for nought: the very keenness of our remembrance of what was, only seems to point more clearly the strangeness and difference of what *is*; the completeness of our identity with the past seems but to sever us more entirely from the present. The body of our hope has been given to us: but it is a dead body, for the soul which animated it before, the soul of the old life and the old love, has gone, "blotted like breath from a glass," in that first moment when we stand gazing with brimming eyes into the face which is *not* the face which we have loved to picture and craved to see for many and many a bygone day. He has come back to us. He is here; and even as we say the words we feel with a quiver of loss piercing to the very marrow of our hearts that in very truth it is not so, but that in that moment he has been taken away; not for a time as before, but for always; and that the moment of our gain is in actual fact that of a cruel and irredeemable loss.

Something of this—which we have all felt at times and grown used to expecting, knowing, as experience the consoler teaches us, that it does not last, and that the more readily we

shut our eyes to the ideal and accept the reality, the more easily the one will fuse with the other till the old seems to blend with the new, and the past to be given back to us with the present—Ellice was feeling now. She had so often fancied this meeting and all the incidents connected with it. She had so often thought of all she wanted to say to Gordon, and all he would want to say to her, that now that he was come, or rather, that this strange man had come in his place, it seemed impossible that anything should be as she had imagined, and worse than difficult to say anything at all; and Gordon too felt the strangeness, though in a lesser degree; or rather the over-keen sensibilities of the girl reacted on the calmer nature of the man, and produced in part the very constraint and formality which pained her. It was a relief to both, though neither would have avowed it, when Mrs. Herne came into the room, gorgeous in her new cap, beaming with smiles and voluble in the heartiness of her welcome to the nephew she had never before seen. What he was in himself, or what he was like, mattered little to her, good soul. Her greeting would have been as cordial if he had been a blacka-

moor or a dwarf; and Ellice found herself, rather to her bewilderment, beginning to feel more easy and familiar with the Gordon who had always seemed like her own especial property, and no one else's, as she stood by while Mrs. Herne reached up on tip-toe to kiss and pat the big, awkward-limbed fellow, made him stand up at his full height that she might see how tall he was, and sit down that she might push back his sandy hair to look for "brother Harry's" brow, pinched his sallow, clean-shaven cheeks, told him that he was a good boy not to have grown a nasty beard, and that he wasn't near as good-looking as his father or mother, "though I doubt Ellie will want to quarrel wi' me for saying so," she added with a smile at the young girl, which provoked a wistful look from the latter into her cousin's serious eyes, and the whimsically candid answer :

"He is so altered from what he was, auntie. He used to be just like his mother, and she was lovely : at least I always thought her so."

"Every one alters in six years," said Gordon, colouring as was natural at these remarks on his personal appearance. "I should not care

to be a lovely man now if I could ; but I have been thinking of Lisa all this while as a small child in short petticoats ; and now she looks less natural than you do, Aunt Maggie. You are very like my father."

And from the way in which he looked at her, and in which Mrs. Herne immediately kissed him again, Ellice knew that those two were friends at once ; and felt unaffectedly sorry when the old lady declared she wasn't going to stay any longer ; " she knew they'd do a deal better wi'out her, wi' all they must have to talk about," and so trotted away again, disregarding all remonstrance, and averring that she had her " sick sheep " to look after.

Ellice felt the strangeness growing on her again as soon as she was gone ; but she made a brave effort against it and began to speak at once.

" There is one thing I want to ask you, Gordon dear—the *great hope* ! It is not given up, is it ? "

" Given up ! No, certainly not," and in a moment a glow of colour and light flashed into his face, making it quite good-looking, and so much like the Gordon of old, that

Ellice instinctively drew nearer to his side, seating herself on a little stool by him as she said :

"But—Uncle Harry ! He has not consented ?"

"No, not yet," and he sighed, but smiled again quickly as he saw the sympathy in her face. "One can't expect to have all that one wants at once in this life."

"But suppose he never does ? Oh ! poor Gordon !"

"I shall have had the ideal before me. It won't do me any harm, Lisa."

"I would rather you were spared harm in a pleasanter way," she said wistfully. "I begin to think it is the waiting and hoping that has made you look so grave."

"Do I look grave ? Oh no, I don't think it is that ; I am only three and twenty, you know. Many men have begun later ; and this life is not so likely to make me grave as that. Living is sobering work of itself ; especially living in London."

"Robin says it is so lively there."

"Oh ! if he seeks for liveliness he can find it. I know that that is some men's *summum bonum*. I can't say it is mine."

"I don't think it is Robin's either," said Ellice warmly. There had been a tinge of contempt in his tone, or she fancied it, which roused her irrepressible desire for defending the absent. "He is very clever, and wants to make his name known in the world. I am so sorry he is not here; for I am sure you would have liked him. But some people are lively naturally. There is no harm in it, is there?" with one of her quick upward looks into his face.

"No harm certainly; only it doesn't come into some people's line, so they needn't be pitied for the want of it."

"Don't you like being pitied, Gordon?" said Ellice curiously.

"Well, I don't think it is much good; but then I haven't had much experience of it. Sorry faces don't mend broken bones."

"If I had a broken bone I think I would rather see some faces sorry for it than anything else."

"Would you? I would rather see a skilful hand that knew how to set about the quickest way of setting it."

"I think women care more about sympathy than help."

"Very likely. I know so little about women I can't tell," said Gordon equably. Ellice felt a little chilled, but recovered herself with a backward shake of her small fair head, and said brightly :

"Well, you will know more about them when Uncle Harry gives his consent and the "hope" is realised. I shall be with you then, and will give you lessons."

"*You*, dear Lisa!" and he laughed outright. "I don't think that would be possible;" then as he saw a blank look of disappointment stealing over her face he added gently: "You are not thinking in earnest of our old childish dream, are you, little one?"

"Oh! Gordon, of course I am," Ellice cried, almost choking. "Why, I never think of anything else. *Querido*, why shouldn't it be possible? Have we not always planned it, and how happy we should be when we were living together, I keeping house for you, and you Gordon, what do you mean? Don't you *want* me now?"

"My dear, if the 'hope' is realised I should have to want many things and—go without them."

"But not *me!* Gordon, *querido*, we always said we would keep together."

"Ah! we were children then, Lisa, and I fear I have been going on thinking of you as a child ever since."

"But I could not remain a child always; and if I had, I should only have been in your way. Besides, you have grown up too. You are a man, yet it makes no difference to me. I love you the same any way."

"And don't I love you the same?" said Gordon, smiling at her. His smile was very pleasant, and he felt very kindly and affectionately to the half-petulant, half-coaxing little maiden seated so near him, and looking as Robin would have given worlds to have had her look at *him*. But if she had, Robin would have snatched her straightway up in his arms and promised her anything and everything she wanted; whereas Gordon, believing that this particular thing was at most a pleasant and impossible folly, had no intention of saying a single word to raise hopes which he knew would never be realised; and Ellice felt with a woman's quickness that he was feeling for, not with her, and was not comforted.

"You have changed more than I, after all," she said sorrowfully.

"I am a man, as you said," Gordon answered, still smiling. "When you last saw me I dare say I was a very silly boy."

It was on Ellice's lips to say that she had been very fond of the boy, that on the whole she preferred him to the man: on her lips but not on her heart. Ellice had by no means a perfect temper; neither was she of those serene goddesses who are always just and never unreasonable; but she had the tenderest heart in the world, and this oft-times kept her tongue in order when that member might otherwise have been disposed to break out in an unruly spirit. Women frequently get the reputation for being yielding, gentle, and docile when they are simply tender-hearted. They have an opinion of their own and you stamp on it. You take the trouble to explain logically and lengthily the worthlessness of their reasons for that opinion, and they yield. You think that they are convinced, that their reason has taken in the arguments you have offered to it. Far from it! Ten to one they have not understood, or not followed a word of the proofs which you believe have confuted

them ; or (if they have), that the said proofs appear by no means as logical or overwhelming to them as to you. They still think you utterly wrong, and your arguments utterly absurd ; but they are tender-hearted, they love you ; and it must be a mighty matter indeed which a loving woman will care to maintain by force of argument at the expense of irritating or mortifying the man who is dear to her. You think that their weakness is giving way to your strength ; but it is the strength of their love which is voluntarily bowing itself to our weakness for ruling. *Verbum sap.*

In the present instance Gordon was right in his own wisdom, and Ellice foolish ; yet, though no amount of explanations would have convinced her on that score at the moment, she only answered gently and with a flushing cheek :

“I did not think you silly then, dear, but I dare say you are more sensible now. At any rate if you do not want me ——” here came a great gulp—“I will not think of it any more ; but——” another gulp. Ellice’s eyes were full of tears ; and Gordon, horribly conscience-stricken and embarrassed, burst out :

"It is not that I don't want you. I always wanted you; and now that I see you I think it would be nice to have you always near me; but if the 'hope' comes true it will be impossible. You are too young to understand, and I can't explain," he was colouring like a girl as he said it; "but it would not be for your good, or mine, it——"

"If it would not be for yours, that settles it," said Ellice rather proudly. "I am sorry I said anything about it."

"But if my father lives and doesn't consent, and I go on with the engineering," said Gordon penitently still; "and if you wanted a home, then——"

"Then, of course, any idea of the sort would be quite out of the question," Ellice interrupted, her cheeks the reddest of the two. "Do you think I only wanted to come to you for a home; or that our old engagement Oh!" breaking off suddenly, "here's the Squire!"

And there in the doorway stood Squire Herne looking in upon them.

CHAPTER IV.

AND here I pause in my story to say a few words respecting the private life and character of Mr. Gordon Maxwell, who, though decidedly not the *jeune premier* of this history (that rôle being the one of all others he would have been most incompetent to fill), has too much to do with certain other personages in the same tale to be passed over without some special mention.

In the first place, then, and to prevent any of my readers from indulging vain anticipations that I am about to introduce them to some delightful hot-bed of Jesuitry and intrigue—anticipations which would be cruelly disappointed, I may as well observe that young Maxwell was as worthy and straight-going a young fellow as well could be ; a man who couldn't tell a lie to save his life, and never

had told one, and who was as little capable of a mean or dirty thought as he was of planning any action for his own selfish benefit at the expense of another.

Now, it is true a man may be all this—truthful, clean-minded, and unselfish, and withal never do anything noteworthy, acquire any repute in this world, or attain to canonisation in the next. Yet are these qualities not to be despised by any means, as they go farther, perhaps, towards making a man a good citizen, kinsman, or spouse, than people of more brilliant merit may be willing to acknowledge. It is good to have a laced coat wherewith to show bravely before the world; but better a clean shirt, even if you be forced to wear it under a shabby mantle. The latter will make you a sweeter neighbour than he who struts in foul linen under velvet raiment.

Ever since his earliest childhood Gordon had been intended for the Church by his mother, who probably thought the education for that profession would act as a safeguard against his following in Mr. Maxwell's exceedingly wild and shaky footsteps; and indeed the little fellow took most kindly to the notion, insisted on having a tiny cassock made

for him when he was still a wee child, with long fair hair floating over his shoulders, and being allowed to "serve" at Mass in the little convent chapel hard by, and got so much petted in consequence by the nuns and the portly and peculiarly unascetic-looking old *padre* attached to the establishment, that Master Gordon grew quite impatient for the time when he should be old enough to say Mass for himself in just such a chapel, and to preach to the people from the pretty white and gold pulpit which hung over the nave like the cup of a giant tiger-lily, telling them not to fight or cut each other's throats, and steal papa's horses from the estancia, as was their habit at present, but be good and peaceable, and live like English people ; for mamma said English people were very good ; and, though Padre Felipe said they were nothing but heretics and barbarians, who eat raw beef, walked out in the sun at mid-day, beat their wives to death, and never went to Mass, mamma *must* know a great deal better than the *padre*, seeing that she came from England, while he had never been there, and, indeed, talked of this well-beloved island of ours much as if it were the King of Dahomey's

land, and as far removed from Christianity and civilisation as the valley of Tophet itself.

"When *I* am a *padre*, and have made all the Spanish people good by the beautiful sermons I will preach them," said little Gordon, with that delicious modesty so characteristic of childhood, "I will go to Rome and ask the pope to send me to England to convert the wicked people there—for mamma says there are *some* wicked people—and tell them not to beat their wives any more; and then, when I have done that, I will come back here and be made a bishop, and have diamond buckles in my shoes, and two white kittens to sit on my knee at dinner, like *Monsignore el obispo* here:" an unambitious prospect which caused little Ellice to cry out that she would be a *padre* and have white kittens too; and to burst into disconsolate weeping when informed with masculine contempt that girls *couldn't* be *padres*. Even Sister Catarina at the convent said so when he asked her why *she* never said Mass, and she must be next thing to a man for she had a grey beard, quite bristly; while Padre Felipe, poor man, had none at all; all of which, however, did not console Ellice half so much as the promise that if she would

leave off crying she might get the nursery scissors and then and there cut a tonsure in his hair in preparation for his after profession: a proposal which resulted in Gordon's going down to dinner with a large and mangy-looking patch of close shorn hair on the top of his little fair head, while Ellice proceeded to drag his chair to the table for him, and pour out his cup of milk, explaining triumphantly that though she couldn't be a *padre* herself, Gordon had promised that she should be his housekeeper—*padres* always had housekeepers—and then she could wait on him for the rest of her natural life.

I am bound to add that Mrs. Devereux and Maxwell did not see the matter in the same light, and that the juvenile ecclesiastic was punished for the sacrifice of his locks by being sent up to bed forthwith; while Ellice was mulcted of "pudding" for her share in the day's performance.

Even this cruelty, however, had no effect in quenching Gordon's enthusiasm; for the next thing he did was to calmly suggest to the old black cook that she should make her confessions to him before going to Padre Felipe, so that he might acquire a little practice in

the science of hearing them; and to prove himself a very decided member of the Church militant, by chasing Ellice into a stable and thumping her vigorously because, after helping him to perch himself on the lid of a high brick well that he might preach a sermon to her, her two dolls, and the cat seated below, she and pussy had got tired of the exordium before the commencement of "secondly," and had run away to play, leaving the preacher to discourse to a couple of idiotic-looking dolls, and helpless even to come down till his wrathful shouts brought one of the servants to his assistance.

But if the idea thus early instilled showed itself at first in mere childish vagaries, it did not, like most of such fancies, fade away into oblivion, as the boy grew from infancy into riper years, but rather became an active and practical part of the formation of his character, and was used by his mother, a singularly devout and high-minded woman, as the most powerful means of instilling a habit of self-denial and lofty principle into the boy, and of impressing on him an ideal up to which he might be safely trained to climb without seeming to reproach the father whose life was

in such absolute contradiction to her whole teaching.

She died, and, in accordance with her last request, Gordon was sent home to a large Roman Catholic school in the north of England, Ellice clinging to his neck up to the last moment, and weeping passionately while he repeated again and again the promise that as soon as ever he was old enough to be ordained he would come back, and she should live with him and keep his house, according to their old arrangement ; but in another country, among another race of boys and another race of priests, the old aim remained unaltered, the old ideal grew confirmed and strengthened ; his habits, studies, and even amusements, all took their tone from the end before him ; and when he was entering his seventeenth year he wrote to his father, requesting that he might be transferred to a theological college, in order that he might devote the remaining years of his education to those studies which would best prepare him for the profession he intended to embrace.

Judge, then, of the boy's feelings, of his fury and despair, when in the course of time he received an answer from his father, ridi-

culing the idea as an absurdity too puerile for discussion ; telling him that he was a young fool, and that when he had seen a little of life he would find out as much for himself ; threatening to take him away from St. Cuthbert's if he heard any more of such nonsense, and observing that if he wanted to direct his studies to any particular object, he had better do so to mathematics and engineering, as he meant to article him to a civil engineer as soon as he was eighteen : he wanted no parsons in his family to preach to their elders, and pull canting faces at everything natural and manly in life.

Poor Gordon nearly went frantic at first reading this letter. The injustice of it in upsetting by a word what had been the approved and sanctioned hope of his youth, the contempt manifested for everything *he* held best and holiest, the utter indifference with which his feelings and wishes were regarded, all stung him to the soul and roused him to passionate indignation and rebellion. He neither could nor would submit to such a decree, he said ; and though some of his schoolfellows with whom, on account of his strictness, he was not popular were disposed to expend no little chaff

on the discomfiture of "the Saint," others took up his cause warmly and sympathetically, and none more so than the classical master, a young man himself, a recent convert and, like the generality of converts to any church, more than a little exaggerated and hot-headed in his zeal. From this gentleman the story travelled to the head-master, and here, I grieve for the boy's sake to tell it, just as his spirits had risen a little they received a second *douche*.

A very clever and a very learned man was the Rev. Northby Newark, Doctor of Divinity, and senior wrangler five-and-twenty years before : a man of the world also, calm and polished, not prone to enthusiasm, not particularly warm-hearted ; but shrewd and discreet, with a great capacity for governing and a certain cool dispassionateness in arbitrating between conflicting parties which formed perhaps one of its principal component parts.

In a school at least one half managed by priests, he took it as a simple, logical sequence that at least one half of the pupils should at one time or another announce their fixed intention of joining the priesthood ; and that

of these at least four fifths should change that intention as soon as they returned to their families and the world from which they had been secluded.

His experience had taught him this much, and he accepted it as an arithmetical certainty; not as a thing to be any more surprised, pleased or annoyed at than the fact that six and six make twelve. For his own part he had no desire to make St. Cuthbert's into a seminary, and considered that Catholic laymen were quite as much required in the world as Catholic priests. It resolved itself to a mere question of numerals : and in this question Gordon Maxwell became merely one of the units, nothing more. Of the intense earnestness of the boy's feelings on the subject, of the early date of his choice of the Church as a profession, and of the almost dogged persistency with which year after year he had gone on striving towards its fulfilment, Dr. Newark knew nothing and enquired nothing.

Young lads were given to exaggeration and over-hastiness : and Gordon was in far too excited a state to be a fit judge of his own mind. What he *did* know was, that Mr. Maxwell, senior, had confided his son to his

care, an act (considering that the gentleman did not belong to the Mother Church) of great propriety and generosity, and that to repay the father's confidence by encouraging the son in flat rebellion, and inciting or even permitting him, while a pupil at St. Cuthbert's, to pledge himself to any state of life in opposition to his father's commands, would be a proceeding equally wrong and—impolitic. No parent ever yet had made a complaint of the Principal of St. Cuthbert's; and no parent ever should, while Dr. Newark had the honour of holding that position. So Gordon was called up to the head-master's study and told kindly, but with some peremptoriness, that it was his duty to submit himself to his father's wishes, that he was much too young to take the ruling of his life into his own hands, that when he was of age it would be another matter, and he might be at liberty to choose for himself; but not until then; and that while he was a student at St. Cuthbert's he was to understand himself as strictly prohibited from taking any step which could either commit him to, or lead his father to believe that he was persisting in, the course which had been forbidden him.

“ I do not choose to offer any opinion my-

self on your father's decision," said Dr. Newark, the tips of his thin, well-shaped fingers resting lightly against each other; and his stately head, silvered and slightly bald, leaning back against his chair. "Right or wrong it is he who provides for your maintenance and education; and therefore he who has the right to decide what use you shall make of it. Unless you give me your word to recognise his authority whilst you are under my care, I shall be under the necessity of requesting him to remove you to some other college; and further to inform you that disobedience and lawlessness are in my opinion the very surest proofs of your unfitness for the vocation you desire to embrace."

Dr. Newark was right, of course; and, equally of course, Gordon submitted. He was too well trained, under too perfect a code of discipline, to dream for one moment of doing otherwise; but mere duty, policy and prudence, are poor arguments for cutting your heart out and trampling on it; and his submission was that of a vanquished enemy and nothing more. He lost all pleasure in his studies and all zeal for getting on, shut himself up from his friends and companions, grew pale and gaunt

and reserved; and for a time seemed as if he were in about as bad a way as a boy could be.

This passed away in the course of months. Morbid depression is too unnatural to a healthy young fellow of an active turn of mind to last any length of time; and Mrs. Devereux's and Ellice's letters were a great source of comfort to him. Both wrote with that tender, loving sympathy which only women can give in its full entirety; but while Ellice assured him again and again that "Uncle Harry" would not hold to his resolve, that he was always changing his mind from one angle to another, and that she should never let him alone till he had done so in this instance and let her darling Gordon do as he had always wanted, Mrs. Devereux wrote in a wiser key, entering indeed into his disappointment as sweetly as his own mother could have done, but commending his submission as a sacrifice to filial love which would meet a fuller reward afterwards than the mere gratification of his own desires; and telling much of his father's misfortunes, of his breaking health and uncertain life, and of the hope which his mother had so often expressed that he (Gordon) would

grow up to be a comfort and support to the husband she had so dearly loved, till insensibly Gordon's heart began to lose its new bitterness and his mind to take a new view of the position which had been so intolerable to him a little while before. It was hard, cruelly hard to him even now ; but it did not seem to him as hopelessly unalterable as before : and at any rate if he had to yield, it was better and more manly to do so in a generous spirit than by acting in a way which would make almost as wide a breach between him and his father as open rebellion. Mr. Maxwell might change his mind ; and certainly his wife had always inculcated obedience and self-denial as the two most necessary virtues for a young priest ; and how could he better prepare himself for even a far-away fruition of his darling hope than by practising them now ? Mrs. Devereux's hint about her brother-in-law's health had shocked him. After all his father had been a kindly, genial man, who had never beaten or been harsh to him ; and he was his only son. If a sudden death, such as the doctor predicted, were to carry off the unthinking *estanciero* a month or a year hence, would not he (Gordon) bitterly regret any ill

feeling or insubordination of which he might now be guilty; and would not his freedom be embittered to him by self-reproach and a sense of unfitness to possess it? The star of his chosen profession still gleamed before him through the distant darkness; he would not have given it up of his own free will for all the money or fame which any other could bring him; but in the meanwhile he would work how or where his father wished, doing his duty cheerfully and to the very best of his power, and making that duty a preparation for the reward which he still believed might some day crown his hopes.

It was in the spirit of this self-dedication that Gordon left school and entered on life in a civil engineer's office, a young man of nineteen with a soul as pure as a mother-nurtured girl, a mind as narrow as a pig, and about as much knowledge of the world he was to live in as a baby in swaddling-clothes. Sent from a foreign country to a school like St. Cuthbert's, and always intending and intended to be educated for the Church, he had not gone in for so many boyish acquaintances or amusements as the generality of his school-fellows, and had gradually lost the taste for them. He

had no relations in England besides the Hernes, and some distant cousins, who probably did not know of his existence ; and with the exception of a yearly hamper, and an occasional letter full of farm and household details, which read like Greek to him, from Mrs. Herne, the family at the Croft had entirely ignored him. True there was Dr. Devereux in London, who had received him on his first arrival, convoyed him to school, and told him that he was always welcome to come to them for the holidays ; but though Gordon did, at his aunt's wish, take advantage of the offer and go there two or three times, the fashionable physician was far too much occupied to either see or trouble himself about the lad, leaving that to his wife and daughter ; and poor Gordon, even shyer and more awkward than the generality of school-boys at the shyest and awkwardest of ages, felt so utterly like a fish out of water with a London fine lady and a pert school-girl, that he often remained at school by his own choice, spending his time in reading, gardening, and taking long walks with some of the resident clerical masters. The boy was a favourite with *them*, and he felt happier in their society.

These things being taken into consideration, it will be easily seen that his utter ignorance of the world when he entered on it was not as wonderful as it might otherwise appear ; nor the fact that he did not get on very smoothly in it. He had made up his mind to work hard and conscientiously, and he did so ; his master therefore found no fault with him. The difficulty was with his *confrères*, some three or four slightly idle and not very strait-laced youths of his own age and older, reared in London and "up to" everything in life.

To poor Gordon in his innocence, if you had said, "down to everything in hell," it would have read more correctly. I don't really believe that these young men were any worse than the generality of their kind ; possibly rather vulgar in their tastes, probably somewhat fast in their habits, very likely with much element of good in them, and with more than one among their number who might have been solidly benefited through life by a friend clear-sighted enough to sift the good from the evil, and strong enough to fling the latter on one side, while meeting them cheerfully and heartily in all that lay on the clean

side ; but this was not in Gordon's power to do. It appeared to him at first sight that his fellow-clerks, and the greater portion of their friends and associates, were simply going straight to damnation ; and that even his enforced companionship with them must inevitably drag him down to the same. He blushed like a girl at their anecdotes, and grew pale at the freedom of their strong expressions. Once he absolutely got up and rushed from the office to escape hearing of plans and adventures which seemed harmless enough to the tellers ; and another time took a rather dirty-tongued young gentleman by the collar and put him outside his room, where the youth had been giving forth somewhat freely. It is also reported, that being taken by one of his *confrères* to a certain garden of delight in the south of London, he knocked his friend down in return for the hospitality and initiation into the various amusements afforded him, and walked off vowing that he would never speak to his entertainer and victim again. Certainly, if true, these incidents prove that Gordon had not lost his old predilection for the Church militant ; and he was a young man of sufficient size and strength

to make a blow from his hand no trifling matter. The maltreated *habitué* of Cremorne felt sick for a whole day afterwards, and very willingly dropped his acquaintance for the future.

But, while being gradually cut, and continually chaffed, sneered at, and ridiculed by his associates as an emblem of everything that was priggish, canting and Methodistical, these latter never guessed at the misery of disgust, loneliness, degradation, and almost despair, which was preying on the soul of the silent and stern-faced young man who was making himself so unpleasant among them. There were three temptations which continually beset him, to drown himself and be done with it, to run away and shut himself up in a monastery, or to give up struggling against the whirlwind of vice around him and sink quietly into the same slough as the others. I think myself that he deserved some credit for fighting against them, utterly alone and unhelped as he was, and conquering them as he did; also for refraining from writing to trouble his aunt and Ellice with accounts of his perplexities. Help came to him at last in the person of an old school-fellow, who was

going into the Church and was boarding in the clergy-house attached to a small church in one of the poorest districts in the East End. There were other vacant rooms in the clergy-house besides those occupied by the two missionary priests who had the charge of the parish; or rather of the Roman Catholic portion of it, and Gordon's friend urged, and urged successfully, that he should come and board there also. Father Bertram would find him plenty to do for his leisure hours; lay helpers were greatly needed in the district, and he might read theology of an evening with himself and Father Lawson.

From that day Gordon was a different man. He went to the office as regularly as before and worked as hard as ever. That was his duty; but as soon as ever office hours were over he turned his back on his fellow-clerks and was off to the East End, where, what with district work, night-schools and Sunday-schools, and studies in divinity, he hardly found time for even a short night's rest; and was as busy and as happy as a bee. His old associates ceased to trouble him; and he troubled himself no more about them. He got back his colour and energy, sang to him-

self in his little room up in the roof, and wrote such cheerful letters to South America that Ellice, who had never ceased sorrowing over his disappointment, began at last to comfort herself with the hope that he had got over it.

And yet all this while he had not a single friend outside the clergy-house, hardly a single acquaintance, and never spoke to a woman in his own class of life. Somewhere or another he had read that the less young men intending themselves for the priesthood mixed themselves up with womankind, the better for them; and considering himself as destined for that vocation in however distant a future, he had determined to apply the rule to himself. It cost him nothing to make the resolution, as, when he made it, he was at the age when a lad feels himself most awkward and helpless in a lady's society, and looks on the fair sex generally as a race of beings infinitely more terrible than the lions and tigers at the Zoo; and though he grew out of this stage, "*l'appetit qui*" (to quote a French saying) "*vient en mangeant*," for want of ever being fed never came to him at all. Of the lower order of women, good and bad (and the people clustered in the courts and alleys

round St. Etheldreda's were the very lowest and poorest), he saw plenty, and would think nothing of helping an old worn-out Irish-woman to carry her basket up a steep flight of stairs to the garret where she dwelt, or of putting his hand on the shoulder of some poor girl lingering outside a low tavern or music-hall and bidding her go home to bed : more than once, when they had no home, giving them the price of a night's lodging in some decent house ; and seeing them inside the door thereof with great gentleness and courtesy.

But his intercourse with even this class was naturally very limited ; and of any other he knew absolutely nothing ; and as he never went among them, and had never read a novel or seen a play in his life, he was not likely to be in the way of learning. It might be well for him in some ways ; for I fancy the conversation of not a few of our frisky matrons and "go-ahead" young ladies of this nineteenth century might have shocked his uneducated spirit almost as much as that of his fellow-clerks, and gone far to destroy that simple reverence for womanhood which came naturally to one who looked on the sex as divided between Marys and Magdalens, and expected

to find a Madonna in each poor working woman with her baby in her arms, and a St. Agnes in every flippant girl dawdling along the Row of a summer morning. Certainly Mrs. Devereux and Lyle, whom he did see at rare intervals, reminded him neither of the Mother of Sorrows nor the virgin saint. In fact they represented something so new and out of his comprehension as rather to disturb his mind : people who lived in the world and yet seemed to have no work in it, and no share in all that made it sweetest and most worthy to him. He was glad to get away from them and back to his books and labour ; and felt in nowise tempted to break his resolve and go in for feminine society after one of these visits, which, to speak truth, were as much an infliction to his entertainers as to himself.

CHAPTER V.

THIS, then, was Gordon Maxwell's life. This was how he had grown into manhood. He was nearly four-and-twenty now ; and the "great hope," as Ellice called it, though no nearer than when he was seventeen, was still the one goal to which all his actions trended, and on which his eyes rested in the future as steadily as though he had not long ceased to struggle against the prohibition which held him from it. He knew now, and had realised for some time, that Mr. Maxwell was not likely to change his mind respecting his future ; and farther, that his father's dissipated habits, added to certain unlucky speculations, made it exceedingly likely that the younger man's earnings might, in course of time, become the chief source of maintenance for both, and the father himself become, if he were not removed

by a sudden death, helplessly dependent on his son's care and affection. He knew this, and so differently had he learnt to think on the matter that, had he been permitted, he would even have given up his much-loved work in London, and sailed at a day's notice to join his father in Uruguay; not as a missionary, tonsured and cassocked, according to his boyish dreams, but as son and helper, farmer and sheep-breeder, and carrying out that truest and most old-fashioned of proverbs, "Charity begins at home," with an entire unconsciousness that in so doing he was fulfilling a higher and more truly missionary work than many a black-frocked priest, or minister of the S. P. G.

This, however, as we have seen by the letters between him and Ellice, was not to be; although on the chance of his father sending for him, and with that tireless energy which made Gordon's mania for every sort of work almost fatiguing to minds of less "ten-horse" power, he had lately made a point of studying the physical and political history of Uruguay thoroughly, and of acquiring as much knowledge of agriculture as he could obtain, having come to the opinion (one held, I believe, by

many wiser and more experienced men) that to turn the broad and fertile plains of his native country into golden cornfields, to exchange the mounted shepherds and knife-and-lasso-equipped *vaqueros* (cattle-drivers), for peaceful husbandmen, to fence in and till the vast tracts over which half-savage troops of disbanded and revolutionary soldiery now gallop unchecked by walls or barriers of civilisation, and to introduce a new scope for labour, which should turn the tide of emigration to this rich and wasted country, and so purify it by a natural revolution from the evils which have made it the wreck it is, was the one hope left for it; and a surer and more practical hope than if Ignatius or Savonarola were to rise from the grave and preach a new gospel of reform to the degenerate descendants of their old-world congregations.

The news of Mrs. Devereux's death was a shock to him. The affection for his aunt and cousin, maintained by a constant correspondence on both sides during nearly twelve years' separation, was indeed the one soft spot of home personality left in Gordon's nature. He loved Ellice's mother almost like his own, and her loss only drew doubly close the ties which

already bound him to the girl to whom he had always been so dear. True, he never realised, even while expecting from Ellice a woman's judgment and rectitude, that she was in truth anything but the child he had left her. What, as we have seen, did he know of children or women either? and much that he could not understand in her letters—girlish fancies and pretty, poetical thoughts, and those feelings which are almost sweeter than poetry, because so natural to young, womanly women—read like Greek to him, poor fellow, who had never known the softening and refining influence of heart and mind, of graceful and gentle-natured woman, and were put aside, in the ignorance which seemed to him like wisdom, as mere childish folly, babblings which it was beneath the dignity of a man to waste his time in striving to unravel or decipher.

To find, then, that Ellice, the simple child, cousin, and playmate, whom he had lectured and counselled so long, had grown into a young woman of the upper classes, one of those fair and awful beings with whom, of all God's creatures, he felt he had least in common, was at first almost as much of a disap-

pointment as a shock to him. Why, but for little differences of voice and face, matters really beneath your notice, she might be just such another girl as Lyle Devereux, who, though the doctor was dead, still lived with her mother in Kensington, and was spoken of as a very pretty and charming girl. Possibly she was. Little as he thought of such qualities, even he in his rare visits recognised that she was very different now from the flippant school-girl who used to tease him about his big feet and red-hot ultramontanism, and make him feel more bashful than any one else. She was kinder now, very kind, and most sweet and gracious ; but it was dangerous tasting sweetness, which somehow did not still come up to his image of St. Agnes, and which he could not at all reconcile with his ideal of the "Cousin Lisa" after whom she used to inquire so prettily.

No, it was a great shock, and though it passed away after a time, for the moment he felt cruelly robbed and cheated in being given this pretty, slender maiden, in fashionably tight-fitting raiment, with soft ruffings at throat and wrist, instead of the round-faced, short-frocked little girl of his remembrance ;

while her reminder of his old promise that when he was ordained they should live together filled him with nothing short of consternation, as he conjured up a vision of the clergy-house, with Father Bertram and his severe and ascetic assistant, Father Lawson, at either side of the table, and this graceful young woman, with the long-trained dress and painted fan hanging from her girdle, at the head, doing the honours in their grim and uncarpeted little parlour. Gordon had seen a good deal of priests' housekeepers in the course of his English life, and not even Mrs. Dion Bouicault's charming impersonation of the character in the "Shaugbraun" would have persuaded him that the individual in question could be otherwise than on the shady side of fifty, and ugly and withered to correspond.

"If she were only my sister, or some poor squinting or deformed girl, that people could say nothing against!" was the thought in his mind while poor Ellice urged her tender pleading on him; but as she was, and even as she would be ten years hence, how would it be possible? Would he not be a young man and she a pretty young woman still? The idea was simply absurd, and not to be glanced

at by a would-be missionary, strongly impressed with every stern rule and counsel ever laid down for the guidance of the junior clergy ; and though his intense respect for her sex and innocence prevented him from even explaining to her the grounds for his refusal, he was himself almost as innocent in his degree—for, for the first time in his life, he caught himself almost regretting that he had chosen the only profession which (in *his* eyes) need prevent his giving her the brotherly protection and home she craved for. Ellice was wiser in her knowledge of the social *convenances*, and she only forgot her youth and fair face in looking forward to his ordination as the *one* thing which could enable her to go and keep house for her adopted brother without fear of Mrs. Grundy's censures.

A couple of simple young fools both, and But all this while we are keeping the Squire at the door !

He came up just in time to hear the words "our old engagement," and his red face grew somewhat redder than usual, and his voice gruffer as he said with a sort of embarrassed stiffness :

"Excuse, me young people, if I'm interrupting talk. Be this my wife's nephew ?"

“Gordon Maxwell, sir, yes,” said Gordon rising, and Ellice rose too, blushing with eagerness to introduce “her” Gordon, and with a little innocent pride in his great height and strength as he stood up before her ; but somewhat nervous withal lest the Squire should be disappointed at seeing no sign of the golden curls and slender limbs for the absence of which she had hardly yet consoled herself. That there *was* disappointment, even to bewilderment, in the old gentleman’s face she with her woman’s quickness saw at a glance, and it made her tremble. He shook hands indeed with his guest, and said a civil word or two of welcome without much sound of meaning in them ; but the young man’s hearty grip in answer seemed to confuse his mind still more ; and just as Ellice was feeling ready to cry with nervousness lest he should have repented him of his hospitality, and be annoyed by her cousin’s presence, he turned to a chair and dropping heavily into it said with almost a groan :

“Zounds ! but this beats all ; an’ a might as well be dead an’ buried as see the whole world turned upside down this fashion. Just see to this now, a foreigner *an’* a papist, *an’* more

Saxon-like to look at than my own lawfully begotten flesh an' blood. Eh for the deceitfulness o' this world! There, sit ye down, yong man, sit ye down an' don't mind me. I'm glad to see ye, an' I bid ye welcome heartier than I thought for; for I can't but credit ye mun have some good under a sandy head an' a clean-shaved jowl. Lord! look to the fists o' him! What a sin an' shame not to ha' sent ye to a good Saxon grammar-school. Why, I'd ha' had ye here all your holidays, then, and wi' that back an' muscle, zounds but I'd ha' made a varmer out o' ye by now!"

"I might have been a worse thing," said Gordon quietly. The greeting had considerably surprised him; but his nerves were considerably steadier than Ellice's; and he took it with cool equanimity. "Farming is just what I want to study at present in case I should have to go abroad again; and though it is too late for the grammar-school I think——"

"Ye'd be none the worse for a few wrinkles on English varming," put in the Squire with a grin. "Eh, I wish my Rob 'ould say as much; but as our parson 'd say, wi' that two-penny halfpenny build, an' a curled head chock

full o' po'try, what could ye expect? Not that I blame the wife for't, mind you. She's a good woman an' a honest one; an' I'm bound would ha' served me better, an' she *could*, poor thing; but 'tis a hard thing on a man. Yes, a will say it, 'tis a danged hard thing for a man to see his own litter wi' less mark o' the breed in them nor if they'd been born in Hong Kong or Jerusalem the Golden, while a furriner *an'* a papist comes in lookin' fur a' the world like your own ploughman biled down into a gentleman wi' his Sunday coat on."

"Oh! guardian, I don't think Gordon's like a ploughman at all," cried Ellice, offended at what seemed to her a very dubious compliment. She had already winced at his hit at Robin; but shrank with instinctive delicacy from defending a man's own son against his father. The Squire looked at her in surprise.

"An' what better could he be like, Maid Ellice? What were our forefathers; an' what ha' we all here sproong from but the ceorls of old who each ploughed his own land an' tilled his own field within the 'mark' o' the village belongin' to him an' his kinfolk? Never ye mock, my wench, at the race who

gave a name to your country, an' made the title o' 'Englishman' one to be feared by other men. An' as for thee, lad, come out wi' me an' see the old homestead an' thou likest. Eh, but many's the day thy father, silly man, has tramped round it at my side."

He turned out into the sunshine clapping the low felt hat on to his grey head as he spoke; and Gordon followed with a ready "Thank you, sir." He must have forgotten Ellice for the moment; for he never even looked behind; or he would have seen that he was leaving a puzzled and hurt face behind him. Ellice, indeed, did not at all understand being deserted in this uncere- monious fashion, and strangely enough the first thought that rose to her mind, was, "Robin wouldn't have done it. Robin would never have left me so soon and gone to look at crops and cattle after we had been parted for so many years. The Squire says his head is chock full of poetry; but if being chock full of poetry—'*chock*,' what a funny word!—means liking to stay with women and talk to them, and be kind and affectionate to them—then I think poetry is a very nice thing! and I like it. It was not kind of the

Squire to sneer at his own son to a visitor. Poor Robin! I will tell Gordon how good and clever he is, even if he doesn't care about cows and rickyards. *Ay de mi!* is it possible that Gordon cares more for those sort of things than he does for me?"

It might be possible; but it was not true. Indeed he was thinking of Ellice at that moment, wishing that she had not looked so unhappy when he pooh-poohed her idea of living with him. He didn't usually make people unhappy; but perhaps he ought to have guessed that she would not remain a child; and not have encouraged her fanciful chimeras. It was thinking this that made him suddenly observe:

"My cousin Lisa has grown a very pretty girl, has she not? a girl that any one would say was pretty, don't you think so, sir?"

"Aye, 'tis a comely wench enow," said the Squire, smiling grimly at the young man's inability to keep his admiration to himself. "Tisn't likely though as you'd think otherwise any way, eh, lad?"

Gordon meditated a moment. He seldom answered in a hurry.

"Well, no; I suppose I should like her

looks, if I thought about them, whatever they were. In fact," after another moment's thought, "I'm not sure that I should not like them better if they were what people call plain. She does not want looks. By the way, is she not coming with us?" and he looked back at the house which they had left some distance in the rear. The Squire was now laughing heartily. This young man was dreadfully in love, as he thought, and more innocent than any yokel at concealing it.

"No, no," he said, clapping Gordon on the shoulder and grinning all over his broad red face. "Let the lass be for the present. She's too much sense to come taking up your mind when she knows ye ought to be giving it to more serious matters. Ye'll have your fill o' her afore ye go, my lad, an' she knows it. Coom along wi' me now, and put the women-folk out o' y' head."

And Gordon smiled assentingly and walked on. That he had not the least idea of his uncle's meaning need not be said; but the final counsel, to attend to the object in hand, and keep women out of his mind, was one too well drilled into him already not to be acted on almost by intuition; and indeed he

was soon sniffing the country air and bending his head to poke into pigsties and fowl-houses with a delight and interest which was hardly inferior to that of the Squire himself.

"What, Gordon left thee to go out wi' the master?" said Mrs. Herne as she came into the parlour about twenty minutes later, and found Ellice sewing at a piece of plain needlework, with a pretence of as much energy and interest as if there were no one she cared for nearer than San Francisco. "Nay then, lovey; don't ye mind about that. 'Twas the wisest thing he could do if father offered it; as I doubt not he knew well enow o' himself. Trust me, Ellice, the lad's wit enow to tell 'tis the best plan to please old folk first if ye want to get your way wi' the young ones afterwards."

"Gordon wanted to see the farm. He wants to learn all about that sort of thing in case Uncle Harry asks him to go home to him. I think it's very sensible, don't you?" said Ellice, trying to speak rather more cheerfully than usual. Mrs. Herne laughed and shook her head.

"I don't believe he wants any such thing now, at all events; an' I doubt he'd much

rather be here wi' you, but you're right all the same, lassie dear. 'Twas sensible an' wise o' the lad not to be fool enow to say so, as our Robin would have done, an' vex the Squire; an' he so huffy as he is at times, dear man."

But Mrs. Herne was wrong, as wrong as the Squire himself. They all made their theories about this young fellow, and none of them were right; and all thought they understood him perfectly, and were as much out as he would have been had he attempted to guess at their reasoning by the light of his own simplicity. Ellice, however, was comforted by the present surmise, although even to her it did not savour exactly of Gordon; and suddenly recollecting that Margaret was ill in bed, and that in the excitement of her cousin's coming she had not thought of her for the last two hours, inquired how she was, offering to go up to her. Mrs. Herne looked grave.

"Nay, dearie, she bid me go away myself, for she wanted to sleep; but for that matter I could ha' kep' to my darning an' made no noise; an' 'tis not like sleeping she looks any way, tossin' about, an' mutterin' an' well-nigh

wrigglin' herself out o' the blankets every minute. Dear, but 'tis well she isn't often ill; though maybe she'd know better how to bear it i' that case, poor child. Ellie, dost know if she wanted to go anywhere in particular to-day?"

"Go anywhere? No, auntie, why?"

"Well, I'll tell 'ee, because she do keep muttering, not once but several times, 'To-day of all days. If t' had been any other day, but *to-day* to be ill!' so by-'m-bye I asked her 'Did ye want to do anything special then to-day, lovey?'"

"And what did she say? Perhaps it was Gordon's coming she was thinking of?" said Ellice, naturally of opinion that as that event was so intensely important to herself it must have an exciting effect on others. Mrs. Herne shook her head.

"Nay, I can't tell; for she only flounced out at me for asking. Maggie do flounce out dreadful, wi'out meaning sometimes," put in the mother apologetically; "but I don't think 'twas that; for when I wanted to tell her about him, what a fine, big fellow he was, an' all that, she didn't seem able to listen; an' 'twas then she asked me to go down an'

leave her quiet. She meant it too, or I wouldn't ha' gone. Ellie love, I wonder if thou'dst do something for me?"

Ellice said she would gladly.

"'Tis to go to the village; but thee's had no walk to-day, an' once the master's got Gordon out i' the fields wi' him, he'll not let him go this hour; but don't 'ee go if thee thinks he might come in."

"I don't think he will; and I'd like to go anyhow, Aunt Maggie. I suppose it's the excitement; but I can't keep quiet any more than Margaret. What is it you want?"

It was many things, a draught to be made up for the sick girl, a post-office order to be cashed, and some spotted muslin for window-blinds to be bought. Ellice undertook them all very cheerfully. As she said, sitting still was more difficult to her than anything else that day. Yet it seemed strange, too, for her to be walking alone down the high-road, while Gordon, her Gordon, for whose coming she had hoped and waited so long, was tramping about the Croft meadows almost within hail of her.

The sun shone hotly on her head, and the feathery bunches of wild clematis and tangled

wreaths of bryony adorning the hedgerows were white with dust. All the gay spring and early summer blossoms had been burnt up long before. Only the sturdy scabious reared its round lilac head on grassy banks, and the autumn crocus and pitcher-shaped blossoms of the white campion made bright the meadows where cowslips and buttercups were flourishing awhile ago; the flat green bunches of the elderberries were changing into black and their stalks to red; and the blackberries were losing their rosy colouring in a deeper and more luscious dye, suggestive of feasts to come, of purple lips and stained dresses. The cornfields were alive with people, men reaping, and women and children gleaning fast behind their steps. Some of the women had a baby strapped against their bosoms or on their backs, and were holding another, barely able to toddle, by the hand, while two or three hardly bigger ran behind, gathering up the scattered brown ears in their chubby hands. Under the hedge little encampments of blue pocket-handkerchiefs and big red jugs might be seen at intervals, guarded by a rough cur who sprang up barking as Ellice stopped to look at him;

or Miss Amadrew drove by in her pretty pony-chaise, her graceful smile and bow hardly visible to the other girl through the cloud of white dust which surrounded her. Somehow her passing brought a little momentary pang to Ellice's heart, and took the brightness out of the autumn day. She did not stop to analyse the reasons why. What had Miss Amadrew ever been but pleasant and amiable to her? Robin would be very fortunate if he were to win such a sweet and gracious maiden for a wife; and it would be nice for Ellice to go and stay at the Hall, as perhaps, if that were settled, she might; but though she smiled she shook her head resolutely at Miss Amadrew's offer to take her up, although the latter was going the same road as herself, and trudged on, feeling rather more sober than before, and more inclined to wish Gordon were with her. It was his absence that made her feel so dull; and certainly it was rather selfish of the Squire to have taken him away.

She had done her other errands and was just writing out the post-office order for the benefit of the girl of thirteen who helped her mother in that department, when the good

woman came up to her, inquiring after the health of the family at the Croft.

"I hope they be all purely well, miss; Mr. Robin an' Miss 'Erne an' all. Ye do be looking more buxom yourself nor ye did awhile back."

"Yes, English air agrees with me, Mrs. Pounce," said Ellice, smiling and giving in her order; "but Miss Herne is not well at all. She is in bed with a dreadful cold. We hope it isn't going to be anything serious; but one can't say, you know, with those sort of things. She's quite feverish to-day."

"Dear heart, ye dawn't zay so! Poor lass! saving your presence, miss, I do be mortal sorry to 'ear that'n. Ill abed! Well, that bean't like her of ordinary; an' not like to be out, I dare to say, fur a day or two?"

"I'm afraid not," said Ellice; and Mrs. Pounce looked more concerned than before. The good woman seemed to have something on her mind, for she fidgeted and cleared her throat more than once, and then, just as Ellice was leaving the shop, called her back with rather a flurried countenance.

"Miss, I beg your pardon," she said, leaning over the counter so as to speak lower, and

turning her head from side to side as if to make sure no one else was within hearing ; “ but I thought I’d better tell you. I’ve a letter here, come fur Miss ‘Erne ; an’ if so be as she’s goin’ to be laid up awhile, mayhap I’d better ast you to give it ‘er.”

“ For Miss Herne ? Oh, certainly. Give it me,” said Ellice, holding out her hand ; but though Mrs. Pounce had the letter in her own, she hesitated a moment before giving it up.

“ You see, miss, it mought be of import to her : an’ you’re her frien’, I know, an’ like as no in all her confidences. Young gals —ladies I should say, askin’ your pardon, miss —do always tell each other their secrets ; otherways I wouldn’t ha’ asked you to ha’ took it.”

“ But it’s no trouble, Mrs. Pounce. Of course Miss Herne will want her letter ;” and this time Ellice got it, the good woman being too civil to keep her holding out her hand any longer.

“ Yes, miss, but you see it ben’t addressed to the Croft ; but ‘ere at the post-office ‘*to be called for* ;’ an’ Miss Herne, when she came for the fust one, she told me to be sure an’ be

kurful to keep any sich for 'er alone an' not sen''em up to the house wi' the rest; but if so be as she's ill, an' maybe, as I said, 'tis of import——”

Ellice was getting a little puzzled, nothing more: for not understanding much of the way letters reach their owners in England, she was thinking more of how long she had been gone, and whether Gordon would have come in from the farm and be looking for her.

“Yes, yes, Mrs. Pounce,” she said hurriedly. “Of course I'll take it. Miss Herne only meant you to be careful lest letters should get lost that were not addressed to her properly;” and she was turning away when Mrs. Pounce answered, shaking her head somewhat emphatically;

“No, miss, 'twern't that'n she meant; an' if so be you wouldn't mind givin' it 'er on the quiet like, I'd be real obliged, for surely I'd be loth to offend Miss 'Erne; an' oh! miss, I've a great respec' for the Squire an' your aunt, an' I wouldn't say a word to grieve un any-ways; but a young lady like you, as knows what's what, mought just say a word friendly like wi' Miss 'Erne. Tain't well fur 'er to be out i' the fields night hours, miss, an' she

won't get no good by it; she won't indeed. Good-morning to 'ee, Miss Pelter. I hopes I see you well, m'm."

She had turned away quickly to greet the little old maid who had just entered the shop; and after a hasty salutation to the latter, Ellice retired. She was really puzzled now, and if Miss Pelter had not come in would have felt half inclined to put the letter down on the counter and say she preferred having nothing to do with it. She had not liked, however, to do so before an acquaintance, especially a person of the spinster's lively curiosity; and having hurried away on the impulse of the moment, felt it impossible to return. Still the letter burnt in her hand; and her mind was full of uncomfortable questioning. Could this letter have anything to do with the one Margaret had posted to some Gerrant, Esq., Mitcham, and which she had seemed so anxious Ellice should not see, and what *did* Mrs. Pounce mean by the "fields at night?" Margaret never walked out in the fields at night, she was always first in bed; and then, involuntarily, her eyes fell on the envelope she was carrying, and she saw that the post-mark was Mitcham; and her uncomfortableness

strengthened. Gordon was standing at the gate of the long meadow looking out for her as she came up ; and the sight of his clear, plain, truthful face was a real comfort to her. She had always, as we have seen, consulted him in all her little difficulties that were worth putting to paper ; and had taken his counsel as gospel, wishing that she had him at her side to direct her in every matter, however trifling. Now he *was* at her side ; and on the impulse of the moment she poured out her puzzle to him, asking him what Mrs. Pounce could have meant, and whether she had done wrong in taking the letter.

“ Ought I to have left it ? what do you think, Gordon ? But perhaps I oughtn’t to have asked you—perhaps you would rather not say ? ” Ellice cried with a little impatience as, despite her questioning eyes and repeated pauses for help, Gordon made no effort to interrupt her, but remained staring at the sky with his face slightly turned from her, and a decided frown on his brow. He was not, however, a man to be hurried by any girlish impatience. True, the impulse to answer had risen very quickly to his lips ; but to decide anything on impulse was contrary

to the most fundamental of this young man's rules for self-guidance. He must think a question over, look at it on both sides, and weigh it well beforehand ; and it was not till Ellice had said again in a tone of some mortification :

"Ought I not to have asked you ? I am sorry to see you look vexed," that he answered, with a slight wave of his hand to quiet her,

"I am not sure that you ought. It is not my affair or yours, and I had rather you had not mentioned it to me. As it is, however, I think you had better take the letter straight upstairs to your cousin. In your place, *I* should have left it at the office, and simply told her it was there, and what the woman said."

"Oh dear, would you ? Then I wish I had done so," cried Ellice distressedly.

"Mind, I do not say I should have been right," said Gordon, with another little calming gesture of his hand. "That would almost imply—not quite, but almost—that there was something wrong in the secret, if it is a secret ; and of course it is possible for a person to have a letter addressed to her at a

post-office from perfectly innocent motives. It might even be from praiseworthy ones."

The colour flushed quickly to Ellice's face. It had not occurred to her before that Margaret had directed the letter to be addressed to the office; and frank and guileless as she was, she was no fool, and had not forgotten the discussion about the unknown artist, and that other letter. It was horrid to be so suspicious, and Gordon's grave voice and slowly spoken words did not help to set her at ease. She was still hesitating, when he said somewhat abruptly :

"You are going to her at once, I suppose," and turned towards the house as if he considered the matter done with. Ellice determined that it should be, so far as she was concerned, and ran quickly upstairs. Margaret's door, however, was open, and she could hear Mrs. Herne's voice speaking within. Mrs. Pounce's last words recurred to her, and she hesitated. Would it not be unkind, and perhaps make some disagreeability, if she were to disregard them, and give Margaret the letter before her mother? Supposing even that it were a secret, might it not, as Gordon said, be a very innocent one; perhaps even some

pleasant surprise for the family, and how nasty it would be of her (Ellice) to spoil it. She stood hesitating on the landing till Mrs. Herne came out rather suddenly, and seeing Ellice, asked her if she was going into Madgie. Ellice said "yes" with a very red face, and Mrs. Herne hurried off downstairs, leaving her the opportunity she wanted. Yet her cheeks were still deeply dyed, and there was a manifest constraint in her manner as going up to Margaret's bed she held out the missive, saying :

"Here is a letter for you, Maggie. Mrs. Pounce said it was addressed to the office to be called for, and so she had not sent it up with the others; but when she heard you were ill she thought you might like me to give it you. She said that I——" and there she stopped short, wishing the unpleasant letter was at the bottom of the sea, for Margaret sprang up in bed, her eyes glittering with excitement, and her whole body in a tremble.

"*A letter!*" she cried, stretching out both her feverish hands to snatch it. "Oh, give it me quick! No, hush! shut the door first, there is some one on the stairs, and—and,

Ellice, I don't want you to stay; only wait one moment. Don't tell any of them you brought it me, will you? Promise me you'll not. It—it's only about my own affairs; but don't say anything about it. Promise me!"

CHAPTER VI.

ABOUT as beautiful a thing as there well can be is an early morning in September; the sky a pale, delicate blue, dappled over with small rosy-tinted clouds; the green earth and broad fields—some still golden with the un-gathered harvest, some brown with stubble, and “bushed” by prudent sportsmen—still covered with a light, silvery mist, getting thinner and more transparent as it rises higher, until sucked into the genial rays of the sun shining down upon high-piled ricks and laden fruit trees, it melts into a clear, golden haze; the air still soft and warm, but with a slight crispness withal, reminding an early riser of autumn’s approaching footsteps; roses still hanging on the walls in great clusters of late blown white or pinky blossoms, and strewing the ground at every breath

of wind with faint-hued petals, pale ghosts of the past June glories ; grapes ripening in the hot-houses ; peaches hanging their heads, heavy and luscious, and tempting children's fingers as they turn up their downy red cheeks from under a chaste cover of long, dark green leaves ; magnolias spreading out the tropical splendour of their huge, wax-white cups, and filling the air with a very weight of fragrance ; cocks crowing and hens clucking in the farm-yards ; far away, first one faint "crack," and then another sharper and nearer, and followed by a tiny puff of white smoke over a distant chalk-pit, testimonies to the impatience of some early-rising sportsman ; old Bess, the Squire's ancient pointer, blind and lame now, and fast sinking into that "bourne whence no *dog* returns," wrinkling her ears at the sound, and opening her sightless eyes as she lies on the doorstep basking in the warm rays of the sun—could you or any one wish for a fairer or a more peaceful scene to present to the eyes of a Londoner like Gordon, long inured to dusty streets and smoke-blackened houses, and who had spent all the hottest part of the summer between the grim, map-hung walls of an engineer's office in the city,

and the foulest courts and alleys of one of the most poverty-stricken London districts !

He had risen with the sun, as was his custom, and having conscientiously achieved an hour's reading with his back to the latticed casement and its framework of wooing roses tapping their clustered white faces against the panes as if pleading for admittance, had closed the book, laid it aside, and putting another under his arm, had gone quietly downstairs and was standing just within the porch, gloating greedily over the scene and sounds around him, when his attention was attracted by a slight noise in his rear, and turning round he saw—an apparition.

A tall girl, unusually tall and dark, with sombre, heavy-lidded eyes and a hot red flush in either cheek, was just setting one foot in the hall off the lowest step of the stairs ; a girl, hatted and wrapped in a shawl, but stepping carefully, as if not to make a noise, with slippers on her feet and a pair of boots in her hand. He had never seen her before, but the first glance recalled Ellice's description sufficiently to assure him that she was no servant, and he stepped back into the hall, holding out his hand and addressing her by name.

"You are my cousin Margaret, are you not?" he said.

I do not know how it was that she had not seen him before. Perhaps the door-post had in some way shielded him as he stood on the step outside; but she started back so violently as almost to lose her balance, and stood clutching the bannister with her disengaged hand and with a wild look in her eyes like one detected in a crime and uncertain whether to brave it out.

"Who are *you*? I don't know you," she retorted, speaking almost in a whisper and looking at him fiercely.

"Gordon Maxwell," he said, smiling a little and coming nearer. "You have never seen me; but I thought you would guess. I knew you from Ellice's letters."

"Oh! *Ellice's* cousin," and the colour which had fled out of her face, leaving it deadly pale, came back again in a hot rush. "Yes, I had forgotten about you," and her expression did not betoken any pleasure at the remembrance. "What are you doing out there? It is too early to be down yet. It is hardly half-past six. Why did you get up?"

"I always get up early, and I came down

because, like you, I suppose, I wanted to enjoy the morning air," he answered, his calm, blue eyes noting with a little surprise the irritation in her own and the haggard look of her face. "One does not come out to this sort of thing in London."

"You would get sick of coming out to nothing else if you lived here," she said sharply. "It wasn't worth getting up for."

"Humph! *I* think it was. Besides, you have done the same."

"That has nothing to do with you," her great eyes flashing suspiciously on him. "I—I often do. I—I wanted the air. Ellice won't be down for an hour and a half yet. You had much better turn in again till she does."

"Am I in your way then here?" said Gordon simply. "I will go upstairs if I am; but I thought perhaps you were going for a walk, and would let me go with you. You hardly look well enough for it though."

"No, I am not well enough," she was still biting her lips and twisting her hand round the carved head of the banister. "I have been ill, and they make one's room so stifling,

I wanted air. I have had enough now, so I am going back."

"Not because I am here, are you?" said Gordon gently. This girl with the wild eyes and strange manner interested him as no pretty, well-bred young lady could have done. There was an angry *baffled* look in her face, like that he had once seen in a woman stopped on the point of drowning herself; "because I will go upstairs at once when you have shaken hands with me. I have plenty to do there." He put out his hand as he spoke, and as Margaret, somewhat ungraciously laid hers within it, he muttered to himself, "Feverish. Yes, I thought so by her look."

"I think you are wise not to go out," he added aloud. "I'm sure you are not fit for it."

"I told you I was not going," she retorted; "you can see for yourself if you like. I want air and I mean to take it," and she sat down on the stairs, leaning her head wearily against an upper one. Gordon looked round, shut the best parlour and dining-room doors, which were both open, looked down the lobby to see if the one leading to the farmyard was closed; and then came up to her as she sat gazing at him with a sort of uneasy alarm, and said:

"There! I don't think you're in a draught now; but I hope you won't sit there long. And would you mind moving while I pass you?"

"What do you want to pass for?"

"I want to go back to my reading upstairs."

"Can't you read here?"

"I *could*; but I think you would rather I didn't; and I would just as soon be there."

"I don't want you to go away," she said languidly. "Since you are here you might as well stop. I shan't—long."

"And very right of you. You look as if you ought to be in bed still."

"I hope you didn't come here to look after me?"

"No; I came to see Lisa, and because your father asked me."

"And I suppose you got up early to think about her? Perhaps she was to come down to meet you! *That's* why you tell me I ought to be in bed!" and she laughed harshly. Gordon looked at her, an almost compassionate smile on his grave face.

"You are quite wrong. Why should I get up to meet Ellice when I can see her all day long and every day when I am here? If she were to come down though, I should be very

glad ; for there are a good many things I still want to hear about home and friends ; and that sort of thing is not interesting to strangers."

"And of course '*that sort of thing*' is all you care to talk about to her when you get her alone," said Margaret with another short laugh. Her annoyance at this man's presence made her take a sort of pleasure in exposing his "lover's shams," as she called them. "And he has no excuse, like Nino, for hiding up things," she said to herself. Gordon met her laugh with the same cool serenity.

"That, and any other private interests of hers and mine. I don't think they are many. You, a girl like herself, are likely to know most of hers. She was only a little child when I last saw her, you know."

"And yet you loved her then and have gone on loving her ever since !" said Margaret wonderingly.

"Why not ? Would you expect your brother to leave off loving you if you were away from him for some years ?"

"You are not Ellice's brother," the girl broke in impatiently ; then, with a sudden change of tone : "But it doesn't matter. Why shouldn't you call yourself so ? I've

nothing to do with your affairs any more than you with mine. I hate interference."

"That depends on what interference means," said Gordon quietly.

"I know what it means," retorted Margaret; "and I won't bear it or stand it from any one, outsiders or non-outsiders."

"Sympathy and helpfulness are interference in one sense," said Gordon, smiling, "and I have often been very glad of them, even from outsiders—meaning people not belonging to me. But then I haven't any one belonging to me here," added the young fellow simply.

There was something in his tone which struck Margaret's strange nature. She looked at him more gently than she had done before.

"You are not a bit like what I thought you would be—even outside," she said abruptly.

"Indeed?" very quietly and without much interest.

"I thought you would be a small, smooth, sly little man, and I hated the very thought of you."

He burst out into a hearty, boyish laugh.

"Well, that was sensible! You made up a fancy picture and then set to work to quarrel with it. Is that your usual way with strangers?"

"No, we don't usually have strangers here ; but I thought anyhow that you'd be all hung round with crosses and crucifixes and rosaries and—and all those sort of things."

"A walking Catholic repository, in fact, with all my goods hung out in the shop window," said Gordon, laughing, though a little vexedly.

"I don't know what that is," said Margaret, staring.

"No, you don't know a great many things, I expect. Never mind me ; I'm your cousin, and you see what I'm like. Can't you forget what you fancied me, and try to feel kindly and pleasantly to me as your father and mother do ?"

"Father wouldn't have felt pleasantly to you, don't think it, if you *had* had a lot of crosses and things fastened to you," said Margaret shrewdly ; "but you haven't got one that I can see."

"No, I haven't. It's only the new shops that need to go in for walking posters. Old-fashioned firms can stand without advertising."

There was a decided sharpness in his tone now. If Master Gordon had a weakness it

was an over-due aptitude to bristle up in offence, where none was meant, at the slightest allusion to the Church to which he belonged : a complaint which (with all due deference to very worthy people) I have observed to be rather generally indigenous among the Roman Catholics of this country ; a kind of *noli me tangere* thin-skinnedness which has not perhaps the effect of making them as popular or well-esteemed as they might desire to be. It was entirely thrown away on Margaret, however, who neither knew nor cared to know his meaning ; and was as obtuse as Ellice was quick at reading people's feelings in their looks and tones. Even her momentary interest in this new cousin, man and stranger as he was, was dying out in the absorption of her own passion for Gerrant, and the difficulty of getting at him : a difficulty which the presence of this visitor seemed to enhance doubly and trebly. She sat looking at him with a lowering brow, till suddenly an idea occurred to her which scattered the clouds from it and brought a quick light to her eyes.

"Cousin Gordon," she said abruptly; but in a more pleasant tone than she had hitherto used, "you were out nearly all day with

father yesterday. How did you get on with him?"

"Very well, I believe; at least he was very kind to me," said Gordon, smiling and wondering what had brought the sudden brightness to her face.

"He showed you all over the farm, of course? Do you care for that sort of thing?"

"Yes, exceedingly."

"Then you ought to get him to show you Wyatt's Mill at Hardleigh End. It belonged to a Mr. Wyatt, but father bought it last year; and there is something wrong about the water-power. He had a man down to look at it, but the stupid didn't understand it. Perhaps, as you're an engineer, you might."

"I could see, at any rate."

"And it is a lovely drive there, only five miles, but one of the prettiest in the neighbourhood. There was an old priory once at Hardleigh End, and now some Roman Catholic nuns have built a little convent almost on the ruins about half a mile from the mill. Father will like to show you the place. There is nothing pleases him more than showing his property to people."

"Then I will ask him, and we shall both be pleased. You will come too, won't you?"

"I? No!" then softening with an effort the sharpness of her first answer: "The dog-cart only holds three, and Ellice must go, of course. She raves about Hardleigh End."

"But if it is only five miles I can walk, and then you could both go."

"Thank you," with less gratitude than irritation, "but I would rather not. I hate show places, and—and I'm not well enough."

"No, I don't think you are; but, in that case, Lisa might like to stay with you. It seems selfish for us to go out pleasuring, and leave you at home."

"Good gracious! do you think you are any *good* to me?" cried Margaret, almost stamping with impatience. "How did I do before either of you came? And there is mother here as well. I—I hate having people always about me." She got up as she spoke, and, still holding the boots partly hidden under her shawl, added more pleasantly: "Then you will ask father? He won't propose it unless you do; but he and Ellice will like nothing better than to go."

"And *you* will like to get rid of us," said

Gordon, looking at her full, but good-naturedly. Margaret's eyes fell and her colour rose.

"I am not well," she repeated sullenly.

"No, and you will make your cold worse lingering on these stairs. We will go, Cousin Margaret."

"You will enjoy it, I know," she answered, trying to recover herself; "and father is always in a good temper when he has Ellice about him. *She* cares for country things, or pretends to do so. Oh! she has grown a much greater favourite with him than I am."

"That is not true, I am sure; and if it were, I should be very sorry to hear you say it. You ought not to do so even in jest," said Gordon peremptorily.

"But it is true; and what's more, I don't care a bit. Why should I? I'm rather glad. Yes," checking him as he was about to speak; "I was not at first, perhaps, but I am *now*. You may believe me when I say that. I am glad that they like her, and I am glad that she suits them; and I hope she will stay with them—with us, I mean, for always—but I forgot you! Perhaps you want to take her away soon? Don't just yet. Leave her here while they—while we want her. Promise me you will."

"I!" he repeated, opening his eyes. "Why should I *want* to take her away if I——" but Margaret interrupted him.

"Hush! don't make pretences. Only promise me that and—— Is that a servant coming? Yes! I must go back to my room," and, gathering her shawl round her, she ran swiftly upstairs again, leaving him no time for a reply. Getting up from his chair he went out to the porch and stood on the gravel walk outside thinking. This strange girl was a sort of revelation to him. He had never seen any like her before. True, he had not seen many of any sort, but still even his inexperience of women could not but perceive that she was different from both Ellice and Lyle Devereux, not to speak of the young women with whom he had happened to come in contact in the courts and alleys of Clerkenwell. Her tone in speaking of Ellice struck him as especially peculiar. Could it be, as the latter had once hinted, that she was an object of jealousy with this dark, fierce-looking girl; and if so, ought she to be allowed to remain in such a position? Was it she who was in fault, or was it only an unhappy chance and not to be remedied, but by time or her removal? And where else

could she go, except to the Devereuxs', at whose household he made mental grimaces viewing it, beside what seemed to him the infinitely greater happiness and safety of this? But yet what else was before her, poor little orphan maiden, cast thus early on the wide world! If he were only her brother *de facto*, with right to take her away and protect her himself, that would be best of all, for what an amount of work and usefulness he could find for her among Father Bertram's poor people! Enough to fill her whole life. Why, in sewing for half-naked children alone she might have sufficient occupation for every hour of the day and most of those of the night; and again the regretful thought came to him: "If she was only not so stupidly pretty, but had a hump-back, or a squint!" things might have been arranged somehow then without offending the laws of propriety, and her housekeeper idea have been carried out after all; but now—— He was so busy, this oddly utilitarian and unromantic young man, in meditating on his little cousin and her life here and afterwards, that he never heard her own fresh young voice call to him from an upper window, but went walking on and on, down the garden

and the Long Meadow, and so out to the downs, whence he did not return till breakfast was on the table and the whole family assembled for it.

Margaret was among them, and cut short a rebuke she was receiving from her mother for having come down at all when her cold was so bad, by holding out her hand to him and saying, "How do you do, cousin?" as though they had never met before. Another man might have understood it so at least, and acted on the hint; but though Gordon took her hand, he said cheerfully :

"I wasn't *going* to have said good-morning to you, as we have seen each other already this morning;" adding, as he turned to Ellice, "Cousin Margaret and I made acquaintance before you were up, señorita. The bright morning beguiled us both out of bed, and nearly made me forget the breakfast-time."

"Yes," said Ellice quietly, "I know. I heard your voices."

She did not go on to say that she had been rather hurt at his not hearing hers, and being so much taken up with the morning that he had never given a thought to her, even though she had in fact dressed more hurriedly than

usual, on purpose that they might have a comfortable home talk before the family assembled.

"*I* could not have gone off for a long walk by myself, and enjoyed it so much as not even to want him with me, after being parted from him for years, as we have been," she thought with a little sore swelling in her heart, which, as we know, happened to be most utterly unjust; but the feeling soon passed away, as she looked at his plain earnest face and keen blue eyes, all lit up with eagerness, as he leant forward on the table, forgetting his breakfast, while he discussed with the Squire some farming plan which it struck him might be carried out on his father's estancia: something which he had only seen for the first time on the previous day, but which he had already got all clearly mapped out in his mind for utilisation in America: and she asked herself with rather sorrowful humility why she should expect a man, who understood and cared so much for the wide and practical interests of life, to have leisure for dwelling on herself and her probable feelings as if he were only a weak girl as full of fancy and sentiment as his silly little cousin? She was but a child

after all, she said to herself, silly and spoilt and ignorant of all those matters which seemed so clear to him; and he had grown into a strong self-reliant man, with a life and interests altogether apart from and independent of hers. Had he not laughed at that cherished dream which had been so real and present with her all these years; laughed at, and put it aside as a childish absurdity, even while he told her she was as dear as ever to him? Ah well, she must learn to be grateful and contented with that assurance, and with knowing, as looking into his candid eyes she could not fail to know, that when *he* gave it, it was, with all else he said, not a mere word to soothe and please her, but the plain full truth, neither more nor less.

The little sadness remained, however, and was not dissipated even when they were on the way to Hardleigh End. Yet she was very angry with herself for it, and she blamed herself severely for its renewal when she heard Gordon suggesting the excursion to her uncle, and the hour for it being fixed on, as though only those two were going, and there was no thought of her or anyone else. It was Mrs. Herne who put in :

"There's only room for one o' the lasses i' the dogcart; so 'tis well thou art not well enough to go, Maggie love, for in course Ellice must be the one."

"Aye, aye, Maid Ellice, we munna' leave thee out where Gordon's like to be, eh, lass?" chuckled the Squire; and then as Ellice coloured and faltered, struggling between good sense and a petulant desire to say she would rather stay at home, Gordon turned to her, and put in with some surprise:

"Why, Ellice, wouldn't *you* like it? Cousin Margaret said you were fond of the place. I shouldn't have thought of going otherwise;" his manner full of such evident unconsciousness of the reason for her hesitation, that Ellice, heartily ashamed of her folly, hastened to answer in the affirmative, and own that she would like it very much if Margaret did not want her and was not able to go. Many days afterwards she remembered the feverish hurry with which Margaret disclaimed all taste for company or excursions; but now she was only thinking, "What *can* be the matter with me to make me so foolish and touchy? I never was so before. I think it must be that Robin has spoilt me so much."

CHAPTER VII.

I AM afraid that the same thought came back to Ellice's mind after they had arrived at the old mill, and inspected its beauties. All the way there the Squire and Gordon had talked about labour and emigration, topics on which she being supposed to know nothing, was allowed to remain silent; but when they reached their destination, and while her guardian was speaking to one of the men, she did get a few words with her cousin, and began eagerly showing him her favourite points in the landscape.

"It was Robin who brought his sister and me here first," she said, "and we had our lunch with us, and eat it down on that great stone by the river. Look, Gordon, how beautifully the steep brown bank beyond slopes upwards on the other side; and how those tall fir-trees stand out against the blue at the top as if

they were stretching out their arms with pleasure at having climbed up so high, or wanted to embrace the pretty feathery birch that is bowing to them so gracefully from the other side of the water. . Isn't it all lovely? I have always wished you could see it."

"Yes," he said abstractedly, and hardly looking where she pointed. "See here, Lisa, I think I can see where my uncle's difficulty is. He would have to dam up the water there; and draw a line from that angle to the mill-pond here, and As for labour, I know men starving and pining for work; and a job like this if I could get it for them Stay, there is my uncle; I must go and show it to him." And off he dashed, leaving Ellice standing by the dogcart, and was soon to be seen walking down by the mill-stream with his uncle, explaining and laying down the law; while the old man seemed to listen, and either differ or agree with as much animation as the younger.

Ellice sat down on the grass and watched them till they went out of sight; and then she sat on for a long while—an hour as it seemed to her; but it might not have been so long—till she began to wonder whether

they had forgotten her altogether; and her mind wandered back to the last time she had been there. She had been alone with Robin then. They had driven over with a message to the Squire, who was busy over some of the many proposed alterations at the mill; and after delivering it they had wandered down the stream, and sat for a long time by the water, looking over a copy of the "Last Tournament," which Robin had just got from London for her. What a hurry *he* had been in that day to get the business with his father over, that he might carry her off and show her the book she had wanted. How steadily he had always put her first, even vexing her by neglecting other people in his desire that she should be pleased and attended to. What should she have done without him, she thought, those first months after her arrival in England; and yet all the while she had been pining for a sight of Gordon, holding up his perfections against his cousin's faults, and recking nothing of the happiness in her hand while thinking of that greater yet to come, when Gordon should have been allowed to take orders, and should send for her to be his housekeeper.

Poor silly little girl ! She had got her hero now—and he was still a hero to her—and yet she was not happy, though of course she ought to have been. Only a few days back she had been worrying herself lest he should quarrel with his uncle, or offend Margaret, or not like Mrs. Herne ; and had made plans (based on her experience of Robin's devotion) of not allowing him to concentrate his affection so entirely on her as to be offensive to the others. Now he was here, and all these imaginary troubles had faded into air. His aunt and he had taken to each other at once ; his uncle had forgotten his creed, and was as thick with him as if they were old friends ; he had been frank and friendly with all, even Margaret, and had offended none. Even these very works and schemes which filled his mind were great and useful ones, untainted by any tinge of self : one and all for giving help to the poor, for benefiting his father, or for helping others in some form or another. He *was* perfection, she said to herself, and she ought to be proud and glad of it ; and why, why, *why*, did she feel as if a great wave had rolled into her life and swept the sunshine out of it ? as if she had been following a star which

had suddenly sunk and left her alone in the night?

A man came up to her with a message from the Squire.

He sent his love, and he and Mr. Maxwell were gone to see a gentleman close by, and would she mind waiting for them? They would be as quick as they could; but the master wanted this other gentleman to hear what Mr. Maxwell had to say about the mill-dam.

And Ellice smiled and said, Oh no, she didn't mind: and then, when she was left alone, got up and strolled down to the river's bank, where she and Robin had sat the last time she was there and had read the "Last Tournament," and discussed the people therein represented, and the "Idylls" generally.

Robin had quoted Lancelot, she remembered, and asked her if she could have helped loving that great, if faulty, lord; and she had held up Galahad instead, the "maiden knight," to whom alone was given to look upon the wondrous object of their quest; and when Robin had objected that Galahad was more saint than man, she had answered indignantly, that she was sure "her" Gordon

would be just such another saint; and that when she wanted to picture Galahad she always thought of Gordon's fair, true face grown into manhood, and with a shining helmet on the candid brow. Robin had grown rather cross at that, and they had quarrelled, and then had made it up again and gone on reading in peace and pleasantness. Ah dear, he was gone away now, had parted from her in anger, and perhaps when he came back the barrier between him and Miss Amadrew would be removed, and once engaged to the young lady at the Hall, he would not care to walk and talk with his father's little ward any more. She would be left alone as she was now, nay, more so; for Gordon would be gone back to London, and, Galahad as he was, she fancied now that perhaps after all Lancelot was the better man when it came to dallying in ladies' bowers and whiling away the solitude of lonely maidens.

But even Lancelot left Elaine alone, she thought, as she sat among the ferns and flowering rushes, with the clear brown waters of the brook leaping and flashing among the pebbles at her feet, and the sunlight lying in

long golden stripes between the tree trunks on the steep green bank on the farther side, "There are some people whom every one is kind to, and who care for kindness very much ; but they don't *belong* to any one, and so they must get left alone in the end. I don't think it is at all nice not to belong to any one, not at all nice," thought the little maiden, with a sudden rush of moisture to her eyes which made her turn and hide her small face against the grassy bank, and so deadened her sense of hearing that it was not till a voice beside her said, "*Ellice!*" a voice which made her start and spring to her feet with flushed cheeks and wondering eyes, that she realised that her solitude had been invaded.

"Robin!" she cried, staring at him almost as if he had been a ghost, "Robin! it *can't* be you?"

Robin was quite as much surprised as she, and even more agitated. She saw that in the first hurried glance, and also that he looked different—paler and thinner than when he went away ; and in the recognition of these facts, she forgot the tear-stains on her cheek and the general forlornness of the position in which he had found her.

"You have been ill," she said impetuously, her wet eyes taking an unconsciously pitiful look as they met his; "Robin, what has been the matter? Why did you not tell us?"

"What is the matter with *you*, rather?" he asked, stooping his head to look closer into her face, and holding the hands he had taken in a closer and tighter pressure than they had ever felt before. "What brought you here to-day, Ellice? you were crying when I came on you! I never saw you cry but once before. Who has dared to vex or hurt you?"

"No one," she answered, smiling up brightly into the angry anxiety of his eyes. How easy it seemed to smile now! How completely the clouds had rolled away into the land of nowhere! She blushed all over her face at the recollection of the fanciful grief which had brought the tears into her eyes only a moment back. "No one; and I was not crying—exactly. Do you not know people get a little sad just with thinking sometimes? and the Squire and Gordon had gone on, so I suppose I was rather lonely and . . . but it was very foolish of me, and you may laugh at me as much as you like, only don't say anything to them about it. You

won't, will you?" with a quick timid look into his face.

"I am not likely to have a chance of saying anything to *them*, for I shall be gone before they come back," said Robin with a slightly harsh tone in his voice which was new to Ellice. "I never guessed I should find you here and alone—but I forgot, you did not *come* alone: you are waiting for your—your cousin now. Well, I must be going again. He wouldn't like to find his place occupied, would he? I wish to Heaven, though, you had chosen any other place to meet him in but this," cried the young man with sudden, irrepressible bitterness as he loosed her hands for the first time and made as if he were turning away. Ellice looked at him in utter bewilderment.

"What do you mean?" she said. "Have I vexed you? Indeed if I have I did not mean it."

"Vexed me! No. How could *you* vex me?" he answered quickly.

"Then what did you mean about going away? You were angry with me when you went away before; and I was very sorry for it; but now that you are come back you are not going again, Robin, are you?"

"Yes, and by the next 'up' train. Did you think I should return while—just now?"

"But—but how are you here at all then?" she asked faintly. He was not looking at her, or he would have seen how her face had changed. The clouds were stooping down again and had cast their shadow on her brow.

"I was on my way from Devonshire to Scarborough, and had to wait an hour at Hardleigh station here for the 'up' train; so as I had nothing to do I thought I would run down and have a look at this spot. I was very happy in it once, do you know," he said slowly, "but the last thing I expected was to see you in it again. I could hardly believe it *was* you, and not my own fancy."

"And you are going away again now?" she said. It was the one thing in his speech which seemed to make any impression on her; and she turned away her face, conscious of the disappointed look in it, and not wishing him to see it. I think he must have heard her voice falter, though.

"*You* don't want me to stay," he said quickly. "I—I did to amuse you before young Maxwell came; but now he is here——"

"And thanks to you," Ellice put in.

"Robin, I know now that it was you who asked the Squire to invite him ; and oh ! I did think it was so kind of you."

"Kind ? Nonsense ! Did you believe I could be mean enough to hold my tongue, when once I knew what would make you happy ?"

"I know you were always good to me," she answered, wondering still at the bitterness in his tone. "I was thinking of it only now ; and of what I should have done without you when I first came here."

"You were thinking about me !" cried Robin. A sudden light had come into his eyes, a sudden flush to his cheek. "Ellice, have you ever missed me then, even a little ? I never thought it possible."

"You must have thought me very ungrateful then."

"Grateful ! I know that you are always dreadfully grateful, and for nothing. As if it were *that* I wanted ! But I'm a fool to talk this way ; and especially now when this Maxwell, your cousin——"

"He is your cousin too," Ellice broke in a little warmly. "Robin, you hurt me. Why do you dislike him so ? He has never

done you any harm ; and you are too liberal to hate a man only because he is a Roman Catholic and going to be a priest."

"*Going to be a priest !*" repeated Robin. His face grew suddenly white ; and he put out one hand and laid it on her arm with a grip which hurt the tender white flesh. "*A priest !* Ellice, what do you mean ?" he added almost roughly.

"Yes, did I not tell you before ? Don't mention it, because he cares so much about it, and his father won't give his consent as yet. It is very good of Gordon to wait and go on working in that engineer's office—don't you think so, Robin ? for he has never wanted to be anything else since he was quite a little boy, and——"

"*A priest !*" repeated Robin again. He seemed only able to take in that word ; and still kept his hold on her arm. "But then you couldn't—I thought they were all celibates," stammered the young man, "and—and you told me you had promised him."

"And so I had !" said Ellice plaintively. "Always, since I was five years old, he promised that when he was ordained I should go and keep house for him. I have never

thought of anything else, never ; and now—now,” her eyes filling again with big tears, “it seems all altered. He says that was nothing but childishness ; and that we mustn’t think of it, because I am a young lady ; and—and not his sister really. But you know, Robin, he has always been the same as a real brother to me ; and I shall grow old soon. One is not young *always*. Oh ! I can’t help feeling it hard.”

“Hard !” echoed Robin ; and then before she knew what he was about he let go her arm and flung both his own round her body. “Ellice, Ellice,” he cried, “don’t you know that I love you ? I thought it was quite useless, but now. Oh ! my darling, do have pity on me and tell me it isn’t. Don’t talk about being housekeeper to a parson when there are men who would give their whole lives to win you for a wife. Can’t you, won’t you try to care for me ? Ellice darling, I care more than all the world for you. Do give me a little hope, and say you’ll try to love me, worthless fellow that I am,” and so on, and so on, jumbling up prayers and protestations and persuasions in a confused heap, with his bright eyes looking through a dazzled mist of

eagerness into hers, and his arms holding her so tightly that she could not have freed herself if she would.

Where was "left alone Elaine" now? The dark cloud had rolled away and swept the forlorn maiden before it. The sun was shining out brightly on tree and flower and green bank and rippling stream, and casting down a golden crown upon the fair and dark heads so close together. The yellow loose-strife nodded its starlike blossoms to the tall bull-rush rearing its rough brown head against the breeze. The birds twittered in the branches overhead. You could hear the roar of the weir in the distance; and the brown water leapt up, singing a little song of triumph over the moss and weeds and big smooth pebbles in its bed ere it rushed away to fall into the mill-pond beyond; but neither sun, nor stream, nor rushes, nor any human ear heard Ellice's answer: only the heart against which it was spoken, and which took it in and gathered it and her to him in a marvellous content.

There comes a time like this to most people once in their lives; and these two were very young and little spoilt by the world as yet.

There was nothing to damp their happiness. Once Robin asked :

"Are you *sure* you care about me, love; though I'm not a Galahad and never could be?" but the mute answer of the little head against the shoulder where it rested satisfied him without any words : and after that they were very still for some minutes, and let the birds and the stream keep up their concert unassisted. It was Ellice who spoke at last, and then her voice sounded somewhat smothered and like unto a mouse in a bale of wool.

"You aren't going away again—*now*, Robin?"

"My darling, but I must!" and he started, looking at his watch with anything but a happy face, "and at once too. Good Heavens! I've only ten minutes before the train comes in; and I can't telegraph to put them off again. I've done it once already, and they've to send seven miles to meet me. Yet it is so hard to leave you, love; and when I've only just found you."

He took her in his arms again, kissing the small sweet face passionately. There were tears on it; but she smiled at him when she spoke.

"If you must go, go then, Robin. You won't stay there very long, I know?"

"I was going for three weeks. I shall stay three or four days," he broke in; "and till then, my darling, don't say anything of having seen me to-day. They would want to know what brought me here; and I won't have you teased while I'm away. Keep your goodness to me in your own dear heart; and don't repent it, Ellice, for you have made me so happy. It will only be till Saturday at the furthest. I shall be back then, and will tell my father myself."

"The Squire! I had forgotten him and other people," she said simply. "Robin, ought we not to have waited till we knew if they liked it? Do you think they are *sure* to be pleased?"

"Pleased! of course they will be. Aren't you a prime favourite with both the governor and mother? I expect they'll think you only a deal too good for me. *I* do at any rate."

"I don't," she said; "and I don't think they will. But if they are only not vexed—I do love them both, Robin."

"I know you do, my darling, and they

love you. Only wait till Saturday and you'll see. I would write to them first; but I'm such a bad hand at letters; and it wouldn't be as pleasant for you. I may write to *you* though, mayn't I?"

"No, please don't. It is not as if you had ever done so, and while they don't know I had rather you did not," and she said it with a hurried earnestness which was not feigned; for though she blushed very much when Robin told her she must care very little for him if she did not care to hear from him, she would not give away; but only answered with that absence of young-lady-like prudery which had always made her so charming in her lover's eyes. "Shall I be likely to care less for you, now that I know that you love me, than when I did not know it, and never heard from you either?"

He had no time to argue the point for three minutes later he was gone, running for his life to the station; and Ellice was sitting on the bank, alone as he had found her, with her flushed face hidden in the hands which still felt hot and crushed from the long, close pressure of his.

Barely an hour had passed, and yet how

strange and new a thing life had become to her. How fast the girl's heart beat against the ferns and mosses where her tears had fallen a little while before ! It was nearly half-an-hour more before any one disturbed her solitude ; but she did not heed it, or even remember that she was not alone. How could she ever be really alone any more ? Robin loved her. His first kisses, the first kiss of love that had ever touched her lips, were still burning there, and thrilling her heart through with innocent, dreamy happiness. When Gordon came trampling in a great hurry through the feathery brake and larch-trees, and calling on her name, she stood up, looking at him with such dazed, uncomprehending eyes that he thought she had been asleep.

"Tired out with waiting for us, I suppose," he said, smiling. "I am sorry, dear child ; for it was my fault. Uncle Herne let me go some while back that I might return to you ; but I couldn't resist going to look up the little convent, cousin Margaret told me of ; and once inside the chapel I lingered. You are not vexed, are you ? I hope you haven't felt dull."

"Dull ! oh no," cried Ellice. It did not

even occur to her then *how* dull she had been before "Lancelot rode down to Astolat." "It wouldn't have been you if you hadn't gone to see the chapel instead of running after me. Where else should '*Father*' Gordon be?" she added, laughing, as she put her hand through his arm. She was so happy at that moment that she would have liked to have kissed him; and pitied him woefully, when he said, sighing:

"Ah! I wish I were '*Father* Gordon.' Never mind, Lisa *mia*, grumbling never brought a blessing yet; and there is uncle waiting by the dogcart for us. It is pleasant to have your sympathy at any rate."

"Even though I am only a young lady," said Ellice saucily. Her eyes were radiant with the new love and joy which shone in them; and her little feet flew over the ground so swiftly that he had work to keep up with her. Only when she saw the old Squire, and heard the rough peremptoriness of his voice calling to them to make haste, a natural shyness came over her, and she went forward with crimson cheeks and downcast eyes, hardly speaking as he helped her up to her seat at his side.

Fortunately he was too full of the newly-suggested improvements at the mill to heed the timidity of her manner; and Ellice's drive home was as silent as that out. How different to her, none but her own heart knew! All was brightness now; and if her mind wandered from Robin, and the novel happiness which had come into her life, to the conversation of her companions, it was to think with sisterly pride how clever Gordon was, and how well her guardian seemed to appreciate him. Robin too must surely love him when he came to know him. Besides, was he not *her* adopted brother? and anything belonging to her must be dear to Robin now. She had no conception yet of the real nature of young Herne's jealousy of her cousin. Never having dreamt of him in the light of a lover, she did not realise the way in which Robin had taken her out-spoken affection for him; and there had been no time for explanations.

"I suppose if I had a sister he would not like me to be *too* much wrapped up in her," she said to herself with a little conscious smile; while as for Miss Amadrew, that young lady had dropped out of her mind as com-

pletely as if she had never existed. It was not till afterwards that she remembered her, and wondered if Robin had ever cared for her, or if it were all a mistake of his mother and sister. She almost wished that she had asked him ; but the time had been too short, only one hour ! How could they have leisure to think of any one but each other in it ?

“Why, my maid, ye haven’t opened your mouth once all the road,” the Squire said as they drew up at the gate ; and Ellice looked up at him smiling.

“I was very happy,” she said ; and it was true, her cup of happiness was so full just then she hardly needed Robin’s presence to crown it. Three days were but a little while, and then . . . ! Poor child, she little thought how great a change those three days would bring !

CHAPTER VIII.

"WHERE is Maggie?" said the Squire. It was tea-time, and Ellice, who had run up to her own room for a few minutes' quiet and thankfulness, had just been summoned down by the noisy clangour of the bell. Gordon was there before her, talking to his aunt, and it was the sight of Ellice coming in alone which provoked the Squire's question. Mrs. Herne lifted her round, pleasant face in answer.

"Well, she felt a bit better, father, an' hankered for the air; so I bid her go down to the village an' take Miss Pelter a drop o' cream wi' my love. 'Tisn't often the poor dear soul gets cream; an' I thought 'twould do her stomach good, for she's been rather peakin' o' late. Maggie said 'twas like she'd sit an'

rest there some time ; but she'd ought to be in before now."

"She said she might go on to the Vicarage afterwards, ma'am," put in the maid, who was waiting at table ; and Mrs. Herne nodded.

"Aye, aye, then that's it, and they'll have kep' her to tea ; but 'twas thoughtless of them too, for she didn't ought to be out after sundown wi' this cold on her. I'm feared 'twill make her worse."

"She ought to ha' known better than to stay," said the Squire gruffly ; then, recollecting himself. "Nay, though, our Saxon maids of old weren't wont to sit coddling themselves over a gruel-pot for fear o' colds an' chills, an' our Madge is a brave lass i' that respect, an' worthy o' her ancestresses. Howbeit, draw roun', you other two. We wait victuals for no man i' this house ; an' whatever Miss Pelter's stomach be like, mine be's a groain' wi' hunger now ; an' so mun yours be, an' you would but own it."

"I am hungry. Yes," said Gordon, taking up his knife and fork in a way which proved he was in earnest ; "but if Aunt Margaret thinks the evening air too damp for a sick girl, I will take some wraps down to the Vicarage

for my cousin, and bring her home after tea. Lisa can go with me," he added with a due regard to the possible impropriety of his walking alone with a young woman who was a comparative stranger to him : an idea, however, which did not trouble the mind of these out-of-the-world south-country folk, who merely thought the young man wanted an excuse for another walk with his sweetheart, for the Squire put in :

"Pooh, pooh ! no need for that. The wench looks white an' tired enow already. Aye, that 'ee do, little un ; an' parson as like as no 'll bring Madge roun' for the sake o' having a crack wi' me. 'Tis some days since I've seen the good man ; and he's aye some bee in his bonnet to tussle wi'."

"But if she should not have gone on to the Vicarage, uncle, there will be no one to bring her back, and Margaret never thinks of wrapping herself up. Hadn't Gordon better take her big shawl and go anyhow ?" Ellice said, and Mrs. Herne acquiescing it was so decided, Gordon departing after supper laden with wraps for the truant, and with minute directions for finding both the Vicarage, and the cottage of the antique virgin, Miss Pelter.

Long afterwards Ellice remembered the time that he was away. Fine as the day had been, the evening had turned both damp and chilly, as evenings in September often do ; and in fear lest Margaret should have increased her cold, Mrs. Herne had a fire lit in the parlour, which looked almost as bright and comfortable as if it had been winter. They drew their chairs round it and talked, the three that were left ; or rather, Mrs. Herne talked—her tongue was one of those which ever love to ramble on in a placid little flow of chit-chat—and Ellice answered, sometimes sadly at random, sometimes with more than her usual ready sweetness, as the thought of Robin himself and of what had happened that very afternoon struggled with self-reproach for the momentary neglect of Robin's mother.

Her mother to be—and yet, no !—no one could quite take that place in Ellice's heart ; and with the thought came a great yearning wish that her own mother were alive and could come to her, if but for one half-hour, that she might put her arms round her, and, hiding her face on the tender breast, tell her of how Robin said he loved her, and how she could not help loving him too ; although she

had never thought to do so until he begged it of her with such passionate humility. Mother would have been sure to be pleased, and to love Robin, if not for his own sake at first, then for her little daughter's, and for that of the old school-friend to whose care she had confided her. And with this thought Ellice glanced up timidly in the old friend's face, trying to guess what change would come over its pleasant, apple-tinted surface when she heard that her guest, the half-foreign girl sitting there by her fireside, was going to be her daughter, her only son's wife! Would it be unmixed surprise, Ellice wondered; or would pleasure come into it and lighten it with that kindly smile without which it was difficult to fancy the old lady at all. Ellice felt far more sure of her than of the Squire. Indeed, looking at him now, with his broad, red forehead corrugated into a mass of wrinkles, and his underlip protruded as he pondered over a sheet of note-paper covered with figures relating to the proposed alterations at the mill, she felt sundry little nervous thrills beginning to run through her; and making the ends of her fingers so damp and cold that she could hardly go on weaving the delicate tracery of braid and lace

stitches which was in process of becoming a cap for Mrs. Herne ; while her heart fluttered uncomfortably, and she wished much that Robin had not been obliged to go on to Scarborough ; or that he had been in less of a hurry to get an answer from her ; or even that she had had sufficient resolution to defer their engagement till he had spoken to his parents. Yet why, after all, should she doubt them ? *He* did not. Had he not told her, "They love you, little one, and will only think you too good for me ?" Ellice doubted that last bit still, and took another sly glance at Mrs. Herne, in which the latter surprised her and said smiling :

"A penny for thy thoughts, Ellie lass. What's the matter wi' thee now ?"

"The matter ? nothing, auntie," stammered Ellice, and then blushed so furiously that the very roots of her flaxen hair were red.

"Aye, what's i' thy head to make thee go peeking up at father an' me, as if thou wert a shy child as had never seen neither on us before ; an' were feared to look at us for dread we might do somewhat to thee ?" said Mrs. Herne, laughing.

"Mayhap she wants to ask summat of us,"

put in the Squire, laying down his paper and taking off his big, horn-rimmed spectacles that he might peer into Ellice's crimsoned face under his shaggy eyebrows. "Eh? speak out, Maid Ellice, an' there be; for to my mind (an I say what's in it, as a straight-tongued Saxon yeoman should) there be summat as thee mought ha' told—not to say asked us—wi'out waiting to be prompted."

What could the Squire mean? Did he know what was passing in her heart? and if so, how had he gained the knowledge? Had he seen Robin scudding across the fields and guessed at his errand by her silence and the awkward embarrassment of her manner? or was it possible that the young man's secret had not been so well hidden but that his parents had found it out, and were teasing her to see how far it had gone? The hot colour in her face grew deeper and deeper at the thought, so deep that the tears sprang to her eyes.

"Oh! Squire—" she said, and stopped with the glistening drops on her lashes, trying to wink them back. If only Robin were there to speak for her! But here, to her unutterable gratitude, Mrs. Herne came to the rescue instead.

"Nay, now, father, don't tease her. After all 'twas the men, an' not the girls, that spoke out i' my day, save wi' the lasses' own parents; an' we mustn't forget Ellie is but on a visit like to us. If she were our own child 'twould be another thing."

"You are just as good to me as if I were," said Ellice tremulously. "Dear Aunt Maggie, please don't say anything more to me now. I hate to have a secret from you for an hour; but Robin will tell you that this——"

"Aye, aye, 'tis Robin *has* told us," said the Squire, nodding his head rather grimly. "Thou doesn't keep so close a tongue wi' the lads as wi' us old folk, it seems to me, my maid; but mayhap that's the fashion in foreign parts—dang un!"

"Sht, sht, father! don't 'ee be huffy," put in Mrs. Herne, always ready to act as peace-maker. "'Twas part my own guess; an' didn't Robin bid us not say a word on't? so don't 'ee scold the lad, Ellie. 'Twas for thy own good he spoke, dearie."

"Seeing as Rob's in Yorkshire, an' like to be there a matter o' four weeks, 'twon't be easy to scold him," observed the Squire. "Let's see, Maggy woman, when didst hear from him last?"

"Monday; an' I'm lookin' for a letter now," said Mrs. Herne. "I want to know how he is; for he seemed ailin' like when he went away, dear lad."

"An' I want to speak to him about that bill o' Burnaby's," said the Squire, while Ellice sat with her hot face turned away and her hands pressed together, wishing that they would talk of anything or any one but Robin and herself. It was so hard to keep silent when she knew perfectly well how he was and when he was returning. "Wife, dost think there's ought i' the tale o' Laura Amadrew?"

"Well, times I ha' thought she cared for the lad an' him for her. Leastways I hoped it once," said Mrs. Herne as quietly as if she had not been just protecting Ellice against the Squire's chaff, and with a great want of delicacy, considering the girl's presence. "They're a rare old family, and though she's a bit stand-off, her smile's wonderful sweet; and the poor folk do say she's as good as gold."

"Their family ben't nigh as old as our'n," said the Squire angrily. "*Amadrew!* Why, they came in wi' the Normans. A nice thing for an Amadrew to hold himself above the

ancient ceorls of the land ! I tell thee what, wife, I'd not have lad o' mine go begging in any man's pastures, Saxon or Norman, not if 'twere for a king's daughter, danged if a would Hey ! what's that ?"

"'Tis Gordon an' Maggie. I was beginning to think they were wonderful late," said Mrs. Herne, rising ; and then her eyes travelled into the semi-darkness of the hall, where Gordon's tall figure was just coming into view, and she added rather sharply :

"Why, where's the lass ? I don't see her."

Gordon came forward into the light. Ellice had risen too in her relief at the break his coming made in the conversation : but he did not look at her ; his face wore an anxious, puzzled expression, and his eyes went straight to the Squire.

"Isn't she here ?" he said slowly. "I thought she might have got here before I did, for she wasn't at either house I went to ; and I looked out for her all the way back too."

"Wasn't at either ! Why, whatever d'ye mean, my lad ?" cried the Squire, the more sharply for a reflection of the anxiety in his

wife's face making itself felt in his own heart, and being instantly and stubbornly turned out. "Had she left the Vicarage afore you came? Like enough if she did; for 'twas late then."

"No, she hadn't left," said Gordon, "for she hadn't been there at all. I went there first; and Mr. Calthorpe met me at the door and made me come into his study. I told him what I had called for, and he sent up to ask his wife if Margaret was with her. He was very cordial, and wanted to interest me in some International Synod for a unification of Christian Churches. He was warm on the subject, and did not let me go for ten or fifteen minutes, but a small child came in to say Margaret had not been to see his mother at all to-day. Mr. Calthorpe seemed very loth to let me leave then; but I was afraid she might have started from Miss—— (your other friend), without me if I didn't."

"As in course she did," broke in the Squire, forgetting Gordon's previous announcement. "A message is a message, my man; an' that parson is al'ays palavering about some rubbish or another——" But Mrs. Herne interrupted him:

"Well, but, Gordon, wasn't she at Miss Pelter's either? Why, wherever could she ha' gone?"

"Not there at any rate. The little servant-maid told me so. Her mistress was ill, and could see nobody. But, aunt, may she not have changed her mind and gone to some other friend?"

"She hasn't any to go to," said Mrs. Herne anxiously. "Dr. Brown has a covered gig; an' if he were 'tending any one this way, an' had to go out o' night, would bring her along, an' welcome, if she was there; but Maggie can't abide him, nor his wife neither. There's not many people she do take to hereabouts," added the mother simply.

Gordon suggested some sick person among the poor; but was told promptly that Margaret couldn't bear sickness, and never visited among the poor people.

"An' so I don't know where she could ha' gone," added Mrs. Herne helplessly; "an' I wouldn't ha' minded if 'twasn't for her being so poorly, for she's dreadful given to rambling off by herself."

"Well, if she's worse to-morrow she'll get no pity from me," said the Squire crossly.

"Wife, sit thee down, an' don't go fidgeting like a mandarin doll at a fair wi' the wires loose. There's nout to happen to her at any rate in our own parish, an' belike she's eatin' her supper i' the village at this minute. Wenches are never content wi'out they're gadding about, if they're to have a fever for it."

"Perhaps Miss Pelter's maid was out when she called, and so there was no one to answer her knock," said Ellice gently. "If so, and she were tired, she might have gone on to some other house, even Dr. Brown's, where she wouldn't otherwise have thought of calling."

"I'll just turn out again and have another look, if you think it's any use," said Gordon; and though the Squire said, "Pooh, pooh," in his gruffest manner, and asked if his wife thought men's legs were given them for nothing else than to run after her daughter, the grateful smile in Mrs. Herne's face decided her nephew, and he went out accordingly, leaving the other three as they had been before.

There was no talk of Robin, or teasing of Ellice this time. The Squire was thoroughly

put out, and went on scolding and grumbling at Margaret's absence till the incident which, considering the girl's erratic habits, would otherwise have attracted little notice, grew into a serious thing, and filled both the other women with a sensation of trouble and uneasiness which made them half unconsciously count the minutes of Gordon's absence, and brought fresh rebukes on them from the master of the house for the distraction occasioned by listening for Gordon's return, and starting at imaginary footsteps.

"I'll stop this gallivanting by herself; see if I don't, my lass," said the Squire, his face becoming more inflamed with wrath than before, when, after an interminable time as it seemed to his companions, the click of the garden-gate was heard at last; but Mrs. Herne stopped him, with lifted hand, and eyes that were brighter than usual with uneasiness.

"Hush! I only hear the one. Oh, father, 'tis the boy back alone. What can be keeping her?"

He came in the next moment, looked round the room questioningly for Margaret, and shook his head.

"I did not meet any one on the road," he said, sitting down rather heavily, as though tired; "and I passed the doctor's house. A little boy pointed it out to me; and the parlour window-curtains were not drawn. I could see him and a woman, his wife I suppose, sitting at the table over their work. There was no one with them."

"Nor no one supposed there would be," said the Squire irritably. "Didn't the wife tell thee as our lass can't abide them? 'Tis a way wi' my son an' daughter to turn up their noses at their father's friends. What time is't, Maggy woman? Half past nine—nigh ten o'clock? Then why ben't the servant wenches gone to their beds, an' the house shut up? I'll stay here for yoong madam, an' do serving-man to let her in when she's minded to come whoam. 'Twill be long ere she'll go gadding out this away again, I warrant her."

"Oh, father, don't 'ee be so angered wi' her, don't 'ee, dearie," pleaded poor Mrs. Herne, with tears in her motherly eyes. "Maybe she was kep'. There's a lot o' people we haven't thought on: but it's no good guessing at 'em till she comes. I can't be feared any-

thing's happened to her, because she told me she was only going to the village; an' there's the cream she took. Gordon, you forgot to ask Miss Pelter's girl about *that*?"

"The cream is in her room," said Ellice, who had run upstairs and returned while the others were speaking. "I looked in and saw the little can standing on her table. She must have forgotten it."

"Wi'out she changed her mind about going to the village," said Mrs. Herne doubtfully. "'Twas the last thing I said to her, 'Give my love to Theresa Pelter, an' tell her I hope it'll be soothing to her inside, poor soul!' And where else *could* she ha' gone!"

Considering the lonely situation of the Croft and the wide range of Margaret's usual rambles, this opened up too wide a field of conjecture for answer; and they all sat silent and expectant for some minutes; Mrs. Herne's mind beginning to run on tramps and gipsies, though as yet it still inclined to the idea that the girl had been "kep' to tea somewhere;" and Ellice, silent but full of nervous terrors, partly induced by throat-cutting and lancing reminiscences of South American life, partly by Margaret's general strangeness, and the

repressed excitement about Robin, which was beginning to show in her pale face and feverish eyes.

The Squire had departed to go round the farmyard, according to his usual practice, before shutting up for the night; and Gordon seeing that no more was needed of him, and that neither of the women were inclined to converse on general subjects, had taken a book from his pocket, and was already deep in it. After all, he knew too little of his relations as yet to take a keen interest in their ways and doings. It was certainly wrong and imprudent for a young woman to stay out so late without permission; but talk and surmises would not bring her back. If she had been properly trained in a convent school she would never have done such naughty things, of course; but benighted people who let their daughters grow up anyhow could not be surprised at any way in which they might behave. With a man's innate dislike to fuss, he fixed his mind closely on his book to avoid hearing Mrs. Herne's incoherent murmurs; and as time passed and the Squire came in and began a course of sharp and snubbing answers to his

wife's stream of wonder and conjecture, it almost irritated Ellice to see how closely her cousin's head bent over the page in evident unconsciousness of all around and about him.

Eleven o'clock struck, and the Squire stood up.

"Go to bed all o' you," he said harshly. "I'll ha' no more o' this ; an' I be goin' mysel'. If she comes, why she may knock till one on us wakes ; but I'll ha' no house o' mine turned upside down this length. Dost hear, wife ? Go to bed."

But instead of obeying, Mrs. Herne burst into tears.

"I'm sure some'at's happened to her," she sobbed. "She'd ne'er ha' stayed out this way otherwise. An', oh, father, don't 'ee mind what tales we hear o' tramps ? An' there was that painter fellow as got into Giles Jannin's house, an' that Miss Pelter saw followin' a girl she took for Maggie ; that man at Mitcham——Why, Ellie, what's the matter ?" For at that moment Ellice, who had risen at the Squire's bidding, started and turned round so suddenly that she knocked a small box off the table with a crash. Her face was crimson when they looked at her.

"My maid," said the Squire, his shaggy brows drawn together in an ominous line. "There's some'at i' thy mind as had better out. I've noted thou has been rare an' fidgety the whole evening; an' now that mother speaks o' that scamp thy face is as red as if there were that to tell as thou wast ashamed of. Out wi' it, whate'er it is."

"But I have not. There is nothing," cried Ellice, much distressed at the accusation and at the looks turned on her. "At least—" her colour changing again—"nothing that I *know*."

"Nor aught that ye guess?" put in the Squire sternly. "Maid Ellice, I tell 'ee there's some'at in your mind connectin' that black-guard wi' our Madge being out so late. Say it out this minute; an' don't go lookin' at your cousin. We don't want no Jesuitry here."

"And what cause have you to suspect any, sir?" said Gordon, flushing up haughtily; but Ellice came between, her candid little face lifted to the Squire as she laid one little hand on Gordon's sleeve for peace.

"Guardian, please don't! I will tell you all I know. We met him once, and he spoke

to us, not impertinently ; he thought we had dropped something ; but he stared at Margaret very hard, and I did not like his manner. I never thought about him again till the day Miss Pelter told us that story, and then . . . but that *is* all I know," breaking off suddenly with another deep blush, and a quick shame of her own suspicions as the thought of the slight ground on which they rested, and of how treacherous Margaret would think her, rushed upon her mind. The confusion in her face, however, was too transparent ; and the Squire lost all control of himself and burst into such a storm of angry questioning and accusations of double dealing that Gordon came to the rescue.

"You are excited, sir," he said, laying one strong hand on Ellice's shoulder so as to draw her to his side, "or you would not speak to my little cousin in that way. She has told you all she *knows*, and you have no right to ask anything more from her. Suspicions are not facts."

"Suspicions ! An' o' whom pray, yoong man ?" cried the Squire, glad to find some one else on whom to expend his wrath, while Mrs. Herne began to cry, repeating helplessly :

"Do 'ee tell us what 'ee think, Ellie ; do 'ee, dearie."

"Dost know thou'rt speaking o' *my* daughter, the daughter o' an honest Saxon? Wife, hold thy prate. 'Suspensions,' indeed, an o' our Marg'ret! Ellice, my maid, I wonder thou'rt not shamed to hint at what thou durstn't say. Speak it out, lass, an' make no more about it ; or this house is no place for thee."

"Yes, I think you had better, dear," said Gordon quietly, and with his arm still round her. "Margaret will explain it all for herself; but I think she will hardly be angry with you for speaking now."

And so adjured Ellice told all she knew : the man's voice she had heard speaking to Margaret outside the orchard that afternoon, the letter posted to some "Gerrant, Esq.," at Mitcham, and the letter which she had given to Margaret. It was little enough, after all ; but perhaps her unwillingness to say it, and the interruptions and interjections of the Squire, made it seem more. How thankful she was for the silent support of Gordon's arm she could not have said ; for as it was, her guardian hardly waited for her to finish

before bursting into a tempest of rage which only those who knew him very well could have told was but the cover for the anxiety he was feeling on Margaret's account.

It was all Ellice's fault — not that he believed a word of it ; but it was her fault all the same. *His* girl meet a man an' then lie about it ! And if so, why hadn't Ellice spoke out then ? "Thought she might have been dreaming, and Margaret *looked* at her !" Both couldn't be true ; an' how dared she take letters in secret from the post-office an' give them in secret to his daughter ? Margaret had never dreamt of such underhand doings before, never would have dreamt of them if she hadn't been put up to it ; and as to Ellice pretending she didn't know what was in the letter, or any more about it, why he didn't put any faith in her. When a girl came to them, an' was treated by him an' his as though she were one o' the family, an' pretended to treat them as if she *were* o' the family, keeping everything to herself all the while, and carrying on her own love-making on the sly, instead of trusting in them as trusted her, like enough his own poor lass would suffer from seeing such ways, and want to do the

same Not that he believed a word of the whole story, though, mind you, not a "word."

"Ellice, what does he mean by love-making?" said Gordon quietly. He had felt the little figure tremble against his arm, and seen the quick, painful flush which answered to *that* cut. She turned quickly to him, hiding her head against his shoulder.

"Gordon, indeed I did not mean to hide it; or be sly. I did not know they guessed; and it was only this afternoon——"

"*What* was only this afternoon?" he asked, with a surprise which savoured of sternness, and moving slightly, very slightly, but it was enough to make her lift her face. "Lisa, what do you mean?" but before Ellice could answer, the Squire, indignant at this double duplicity as it seemed to him, broke in :

"Nephew Maxwell, art not ashamed to go on wi' this make-believe? If thee hast any love for the wench thee'd better not show it by teaching her thy foreign trickeries where there be no cause for them, but——"

"Sir, I am teaching Ellice Devereux no trickeries, foreign or otherwise," said Gordon sharply; "and you have no right to insult me

by saying so. Ellice knows that I love her. There is no make-believe in that; and if you consider——”

“Ah, Gordon dearie, don’t ’ee be so quick to answer him back,” sobbed Mrs. Herne. “He only meant she might have told us. We took so kindly to her, you see, and goodness knows we wish nought but good to both o’ you But, father, if she says ’twas only settled this afternoon?”

“Settled this afternoon!” sneered the Squire. “What, when Robin told us——”

“But I did not know he had. He said he would do so, and that you would be pleased. I am sorry I said anything to him if you are not; but indeed it was only to-day—at the mill,” cried poor little Ellice, weeping now so uncontrollably that Gordon drew her to him again with the old brotherly tenderness which had so bound her heart to him of yore, and which made her cling to him now as to a rock of refuge. Oh! how good it was to have him, her brother, there! What should she have done without him? But Mrs. Herne interrupted her pitiful pleading with a nervous impatience which showed the anxiety in her mother’s heart.

“Oh! father, let her alone. What do it matter now—about *them*, an’ it past twelve o’clock an’ our own child not come in! Hush! Lord ha’ mercy! what’s that?”

A knock at the door; not a double knock, but a single, heavy bang striking on their ears like a thunderclap. Gordon was nearest, and letting Ellice go, sprang and opened it before any one else could move. The moon was shining brightly outside, and its white rays fell across the threshold and on the figure, *not* of Margaret, but of a lad about sixteen, covered with half-dried mud, and holding a piece of folded paper in his hand.

CHAPTER IX.

GERRANT was going away, and the rooms which he occupied at No. 5, High Street, Mitcham, were in that state of confusion which lodgings generally present when their occupant is leaving, and more especially when that occupant is an artist. The door was open between the two apartments, and the bed, table, chairs, and floor were strewn with every variety of litter that it is possible for the mind of man to conceive in the shape of clothes, newspapers, unfinished canvases, empty bottles, railway novels, tubes of oil-paint, and brushes, all mixed up together in most heterogeneous confusion.

He had one of the canvases in his hand at the present moment, holding it at a little distance from him so as to get a good light on it before placing it with sundry others in a

packing-case which stood in the middle of the *débris* of straw and litter before him; and was regarding it with an eye whose criticalness was softened by some little tenderness and more than a little regret. His coat was off, he had a short pipe in his mouth, and his dark hair was rumpled over his forehead and decorated with more than one fragment of flue and straw; but nevertheless, with the sun shining through the white curtains of his little parlour window on his big, muscular limbs, his sunburnt face and tangled curls, he looked both handsome and picturesque; and the pictured face on which he was looking was handsome too, wonderfully handsome, with eyes that seemed to burn into his as he gazed down into them.

“I shall never get a model like her,” he muttered at last. “Never! That’s as like her as it can be. I’ve idealised of course, but the eyes are exact; and I had learnt how to make them look like that whenever I pleased. I don’t believe I shall ever meet such another anywhere, if there is one to be met. And to have to cut the hanged place and leave her in the middle—d—— it all! it’s too bad. Why wasn’t she a gipsy really?”

There was a knock at the parlour door, and he turned round impatiently, laying the canvas on the table as Kitty the maid looked in, her face a little smuttier than usual, and the door-handle held in the skirt of her gown to preserve it from a grimy paw which appeared to have been digging in the coal-hole for the last twenty-four hours.

"Please, sir, 'tis a lady askin' for yer."

"A *lady*! What can—who is she?"

"Her as coom to yer afore, please, sir," said Kitty, looking not at him but over her shoulder. "An' here a be, please, sir," with which she moved aside, giving place to Margaret Herne, whose tall head was already towering above the little maid-of-all-work's frowsy topknot, and who came in rapidly, shutting the door behind her with a curtness and want of ceremony which was not soothing to Kitty's sensitive feelings. She marched downstairs in a huff, and relieved herself of some of it in comments on Margaret's visits to her mistress's lodger which were not complimentary to the young lady in question.

Little, however, did Margaret heed or think of the remarks she excited. She had

walked five miles, and her dress and feet were white with dust, her face white too, but for a scarlet spot on either cheek, her lips dry and cracked, with fever and fatigue, and with a wild look in her eyes which Gerrant had never seen in them before ; and which made him instinctively draw back as he stammered out her name.

“*Margaret!* You here! What has brought you?”

“*You,*” she answered, and then she came quickly up to him, laying her two hands on his shoulders and looking up in his face. “Nino, I came because——” she was half choking and broke off passionately. “How could you—oh! how could you write that to me! Did you think I would bear it?”

“Bear what? What did I write to you? Margaret, my dearest, don’t be so excited,” he faltered, half embarrassed by what he knew of her meaning, and half puzzled as to its fulness. The pressure on his shoulders deepened as she looked up into his face in an agony of impatience.

“About saying good-bye to me and—and going away. Nino, you are not going away! You would not do so?”

"But I am, I must. Nay, listen to me, child," with some imperiousness; for her face frightened him. "I am obliged to go. I have been sent for; and there is no putting it off" (it was a lie of course; but that was nothing, the object was to quiet her.) "Do you think I would *want* to leave you, Fire-queen?" and tempted by the nearness of her face he stooped his and kissed her. The colour rushed into it then, but she did not shrink, only came a little nearer and said:

"But for how long? It will not be for long?"

"By Heaven, it wouldn't be at all if I could help it!" She looked wonderfully handsome to him just then with that yearning feverish light in her eyes, and his resolution wavered. "Next summer I shall try to manage a——"

"*Next summer!*" The words came almost like a cry, interrupting what he was going to say. "Nino, what do you mean? Do you think I can do without you a whole year? I thought you said that you loved me!"

"And so I do. Deuce take it all! I wish I didn't, for both our sakes," cried Gerrant with more heartiness than he usually used. He did care terribly for her at times; and

this was one of them. The prospect of parting had softened him, and he bent down to her tenderly. "Do you doubt me, Margaret? I thought you had been juster."

"Then, if you love me, stay with me. Don't go away. Nino, listen to me; if you go I shall die or kill myself. I would rather die than be as I was before—without you. Do you know what you are to me? All yesterday I was in bed. I had caught cold the night before and could hardly move or swallow, I was in such pain; and yet I was happy—happier than I ever was in my whole life, because you loved me, only because of that. And then your letter came; and—I thought I should go mad. I took a double dose of the doctor's medicine, and something to make me sleep as well. I would have taken any poison in this world that would have given me strength for the moment; for you said you were going away; and I—if I had dropped down dead an hour afterwards I should not have cared, so that I could have got to you and seen you first."

"Do you care for me as much as that, then, or is it only fancy, Fire-queen? I'm afraid so, and that you don't really mean it,"

said Gerrant coaxingly. The passionate nature of the girl almost frightened him, and forced him to a more soothing tone than was his wont. He did not yet understand the woman with whom he had to deal.

"I mean every word, and more, much more; but it is all here somehow, and I can't say it," she answered, taking her hands from his shoulders to press them on her breast. "When I woke this morning it was dawn, and I felt better. Nino, I thanked God . . . I never remember thanking God for that sort of thing before, but it was that I might get to you. I sprang out of bed at once, never even thinking of what they would say if I was not in for breakfast. I was so afraid you would be gone, it swallowed up everything else; and I dressed, took my boots in my hand that I might walk softly, and went downstairs. *He* was standing in the doorway and stopped me, for I knew directly I saw him that it was no use."

"He! Who? Not your father?" asked Gerrant; then relieved by her start and shiver at the idea: "You don't mean the 'jesuit'?"

"Yes, her lover. I had not seen him before,

I was too ill; but he knew who I was at once, and told me so. There was a look in his eyes as if he knew where I was going too. I felt that if I had gone on he would have followed me, and I could not have prevented him. He is not like what I thought he was."

"In what way?" said Gerrant, laughing. "Do you mean he had not a palpable tail, or that his horns did not stick out of his hair? *Ma belle*, I told you you had more imagination than you give yourself credit for."

Margaret shook her head impatiently.

"No, it was not that; but he looks you in the eyes—so!—through and through. I felt afraid."

"My dear, when girls have such glorious eyes as yours, men will look into them, as I do! don't I?" and he drew her closer to him, gazing boldly and admiringly into her dark face. The blood rushed up into it again; but she met his gaze unwaveringly.

"No, not in the same way. Your eyes say to me that you think me handsome, and like me for it. When you look at me so, I feel as if you were holding out your hands to me, and I must go; but he is different, his eyes are

blue, and they seem not to look at the outside of you at all, but as if they saw all that you were thinking—and were sorry somehow.”

“The devil! You seemed to have looked into them enough,” said Gerrant jealously. “Margaret, are you going to get flirting with this fellow when I am gone?”

“No, and you are not going; not yet awhile,” she said quickly. “Nino, you don’t think I am going back alone, do you?”

“Well, my dearest, I don’t like to think it, because I’m afraid you’ll get into trouble; but I fear there’s no remedy, unless I were to carry you off with me. Would you come, Margaret?”

“Yes, if there was no other way.” She answered with a cool readiness, which surprised as much as it delighted him. He lost his head in the moment.

“You would! By Jove, what a dear, brave girl you are! How could I ever think it was possible to leave you! Fire-queen, say that again, you *will* come with me. By Heaven, you shall never repent it if you do.”

He had folded her in his arms, but she loosened herself from them, looking up at him with that sort of half-awakened puzzle in her

deep eyes which Gerrant had first found so irresistible in its temptation.

"But you don't understand me. Why should I go with you now when there are other ways? I know father dislikes you. I know he ordered you off his premises; but that was because he did not guess: he thought you were after Giles Janin's wife. If you go back with me now I will take your hand and say to him, 'Father, he loves me, and I love him, and I am going to marry and belong to him, no matter what any one says.' He will be very angry at first, and will say a lot of harsh things I don't doubt; but when he sees that I don't care, and that if he turned you out-of-doors I would go too, he will give in; and then, Nino, then you can stay in the house and paint me as much as you like, till——"

"Till I carried you off legally," said Gerrant thoughtfully. Margaret's devotion did not exactly touch him, but her impetuosity carried him away. It was not easy to tell her that he had never had any intention of marrying her, or of making her a proposal; that the latter (if there had been one) had come from herself, in answer to the love-making which had become so much a matter of course with him that he hardly dreamt of its being taken

seriously. It was no use reflecting that not only was he without the means of keeping a wife, without curtailing his private expenses to a much greater degree than he had any idea of, but that there were certain complications in his life—more than one, perhaps—which, if brought to light, as fathers and brothers might make a point of doing, would go far to thwart his marriage with any respectable girl. Margaret was still looking at him, and the passion and fervour of her love so carried him away that for the first time he began to ask himself if it were not possible after all to reward her by an honest affection, and make her his wife. There were objections, certainly; but how could he think of them with her brilliant eyes fixed on his, and her supple feverish hands fixed on his? Besides, if she were an only daughter and her father were rich, why should he not be won over to make them an allowance which——

“Margaret,” he said suddenly, “are you sure you don’t mistake your own power? Squire Herne would never listen to me. I am only a poor painter, with barely enough to keep myself, and he a landed proprietor and a wealthy man”

“But father isn’t wealthy,” Margaret broke in with an eagerness meant to be reassuring. “And as to being ‘Squire,’ some don’t call him even that. We *are* nothing but farmers, you know, for all Robin likes to talk grandly, and to snub me for saying so ; and as to money, it is true the Croft is ours, but it is all father can do to make it pay itself, and Robin would never have gone to college if an old aunt had not left him some money when she died to enable him to do so. Why, Nino,” getting more earnest as she saw her lover’s face change, and fancied he was still doubting her, “mother has to be as economical as possible, and we never go away anywhere, not even to the seaside for a month as other people do ; and as to me, I haven’t got a penny of my own, and never shall have ; and I would rather go to you and scrub floors and clean pots for you, than stay here and marry the richest man in Downshire.” And Margaret looked up cheerfully, thinking, in her ignorance of the world, that she had made matters all smooth and easy now. Had she been clever at reading faces, the expression on her lover’s might have altered her opinion, but he shook it off in a moment with a short, hard laugh, in

which all the evil nature of the man seemed to be condensed. After all it was better as it was, better to punish the old man's insolence by wringing his heart than go to him cap in hand for a favour which might cost more in the end than it was worth. Tightening his grasp of her hand he looked down at her with a smile, which even to her dull perceptions had something of a brutal look.

"Ah, Margaret, it makes no difference. The less money you have the more your father will want with your husband; and besides, I am not going to ask you of him. He insulted me grossly, and I'll truckle to no man living who has ever done that. No, by Heaven! not even for you, my queen. If you come with me you must come now, do you understand? from your own choice and mine, or not at all. You consented just now, Margaret. Did you mean it; or were you only playing with me?"

"Does my being here now look as if I were playing?" she answered almost sternly, and with a look of reproach which shamed his temper, and brought him to her feet in a fit of repentant admiration.

"My beautiful gipsy girl! no. It is because you are so different from all the rest of your

calculating, cowardly sex, so far above and superior to their miserable prudence and pettiness, that I take you at your word, and ask you now to show your own frankness and generosity by trusting me. Come with me, Margaret. You are not happy here, but I can make you so. You hate this narrow, soddening, rustic life, but I will show you another, the life I have so often told you of, but which will seem a thousand times gayer, brighter, and more varied when you are at my side to share it with me. I am poor, I know, but not so poor that *you* need ever want. Nay, that you need ever wear a dress like that again," touching her dusty black gown contemptuously. "Margaret, how do you think one of ruby velvet would look against your dark skin, and gold bangles on——"

"Hush!" she had laid her hand on his mouth with a sudden, fierce gesture, so that he was compelled to stop. "Do you think if I would not come to you for yourself alone, I would do so for the new life and the fine clothes you could give me! But I *can't* leave them this way without even a word. Nino, won't you go back with me, at least, and ask them?"

You know that there is nothing that I would not do for you."

He jerked back his head with an impatient gesture.

"Nothing you would not do, *except* the thing you said you would! A true woman that, all over! But I have answered you already. I can't and won't meet your father, and what is more, I must go by the next train. If you care for your life and your friends here more than for me," and he moved a little away from her with an air of affected indifference which cut Margaret to the soul, "stay with them. I don't want to force you to go, any more than I forced you to come here to-day. Choose for yourself, Fire-queen, but choose quickly. If you prefer people who care so little for you as to have put a pasty-faced Yankee girl in your place, say so; but if not, if you *love* me, Margaret," turning suddenly and stretching out his hands to her, "love me as I love you, stay and trust me. Love, which is it to be?"

"*You.*" Even he could hardly hear the word, but it was the whisper of intense, concentrated feeling, not timidity; and he did not need it to know that he had won the day.

For some moments Margaret could not have said more if she would. Her lips were sealed.

Gerrant had his preparations for departure nearly made, and it did not take him long to complete them. Indeed, he made her assist him, talking to her the whole while so as not to give her a moment for thought. Still the smallest natural incident will often touch some chord in the brain so as to wake a strain hitherto dumb, and the sudden disappearing of a long bar of level golden light from the room made Margaret start up from the floor, where she had been kneeling to cord an easel, and exclaim,

"Nino, the sun is just going to set. It is tea-time at home. They will have missed me already."

"Well, my queen," he said, smiling, "they don't know where to find you ; and if they did, we shall be gone long before they could get here. Don't be afraid, my bird is safe."

"But if they find out and come after us to London ! Nino, they might—before we could be married."

"Very possibly," he answered with a rather peculiar smile ; "but we aren't going to London. These boxes may ; but you and I and my

big portmanteau will change at Farnholm for Southampton. You shall wake in France to-morrow, Marguerite."

She drew a long, excited breath, and her face lighted. It was the demon of *ennui*, the fever for change and adventure which had been preying on this girl's veins for years, and which, under all the power of her mad and misdirected love, made the lurid glimmer of its wings visible now. But even on the brink of hell, God, the All-pitiful, often sends His angels to hold back, though it be but for one second, a desperate soul from its final plunge into the bottomless pit; and the light died out of her eyes, her lips quivered, and something like a look of shame passed over her face.

"What will they think of me when they find I am gone? Nino, may I not write them a line now to say I went with you, and why I could not ask them, and that I will write again when I am married? They will get it to-morrow at least."

"Certainly not," he said roughly. "Do you think the village gossips will cackle any the less for what you could say or write? It is too late for you now to think about them."

"I was thinking of father and mother and Robin ; not of gossips," said Margaret sorrowfully.

"And I am thinking of you," said Gerrant, laying his hand on her shoulder, while he tried to turn her eyes from their wistful outward gaze to his. "Fire-queen, which should you think of most, me or them ? Which cares most for you ?"

It was the voice of her evil angel wrestling with that white-robed one which still hovered at her side ; and how could she resist it ? The sun had set, but the sky was full of a lurid crimson glow which flooded the little village street and streamed in upon the girl standing there with head uncovered, save for its masses of raven hair twisted into a heavy coil on the nape of her neck, and bent slightly forward, the lips parted, the dusky face flushed with a fevered red, the brow furrowed with the inward struggle which showed itself in the heaving breast and twisting and untwisting of the slender brown fingers knotted together in a nervous clasp, the heavy cloak falling back from the rounded curves of her tall, girlish figure ; and Gerrant stooping over her, a muscular Apollo in his knickerbocker

suit and white shirt-sleeves, the red light bronzing his short clustering curls and tinging as with blood the hand resting on her shoulder; but leaving in shadow, dark as the man's own soul, the handsome, wicked face so near her own, and lips now whispering in her ear. A little bare room with grey walls, a path of red light, and these two figures standing in the centre of it. Without, a ruddy evening sky with a band of swallows flying homeward across the saffron glow; and a single purple clematis blossom swaying in the breeze outside the latticed pane; not much perhaps in words, but a picture more powerful in form and colouring, more terrible in meaning, more tragic in suggestiveness than Nino Gerrant, clever artist as he was, would ever paint.

"It is getting late. They will have suspected something," said Margaret.

"It is getting late, we must be gone," said Gerrant. "Margaret, if you love me, you must obey me now; if not, you are still free and——"

She turned her head quickly. The pure red light died out of it, and was swallowed up in the dark shadow of his. The restless hands

closed on his arm as if to anchor themselves on the strength that had subdued her.

"I am not free. I am yours. Did I not say so? Try me if you doubt it."

"I don't; but I must try you all the same. Bid me good-bye now, and go to the station by yourself; not through the village, but across the fields, the way I took you once before; and don't show yourself at the station, but wait under those sheds near by till I come for you. Do you understand?"

"Yes. Good-bye, Nino." She put out her hand as submissively as if she had been a child; but he took it and her in his arms and kissed her twice passionately before he let her go; then, opening the door, said loud enough for Kitty and her mistress to hear if they pleased:

"Good-bye, Miss Robarts, I'm sorry the picture could not be finished before I leave; but I will send it you from London in the course of a week."

And then he went back into the room, shut the door, and, standing in the shadow of the window-curtains, watched the girl's tall figure cross the street and turn off, without wavering or hesitation, in the direction he had indicated.

"So that's done," he muttered to himself. "She'll not turn back now ; and, after all, she is wise. Once find out her visit here to-day, and her character would be gone quite as utterly as by any going with me. I wonder if they're the sort of people to make a fuss. By Jove, she's a glorious girl though, and worth fighting for. Not but what *she'd* stick to me without any fighting on my part. I know her well enough for that."

Aye, he had gauged her character and knew that much of it to the bottom : a knowledge of all others the most dangerous to him who possesses or her who is the subject of it. God in His fatherly mercy protect the woman who has given that power over her into the hands of any man, unless he be purer and nobler than — who shall say what percentage — of the men of this generation !

CHAPTER X.

MEANWHILE Robin was far away in the north, utterly ignorant of everything that was passing in the home where he had never been so much needed, and enjoying himself with all the buoyancy of a young man who has just been accepted by the girl he loves; and who knows that the three short days which must pass before he is again in her presence, will only sweeten the subsequent meeting, and give him another opportunity of reading the flush of joy and pleasure on the little face so dear to him in its tenderness and transparency.

"I am the luckiest fellow in the whole world, the very luckiest fellow," he said to himself more than once in the train. "Dear little thing, how sweet she looked, standing there under the arch of trees in her little black frock, and with those two pretty spots of

colour in her cheeks ! That's the only thing she ever wants to make her regularly lovely, a little colour. Not but what" (correcting himself with the instinctive loyalty of love) "she's prettier without it than nineteen out of twenty girls that I ever met. I used to think Laura Amadrew good-looking—and so she is, of course—but after all, that cold, queenly style of beauty can't hold a candle to my darling's snowdrop face. God bless her ! And to think that she loves me and is going to belong to me after I had given up all hope of her and thought she was bound hand and foot to that cousin fellow ! Good heavens ! what an insane, jealous fool I must have been to fall into such a mistake ! Why, I might have lost her by it ; and he going to be a parson, after all. Deuced good thing, by the way, that those priests aren't allowed to marry ; and highly sensible of him to see he couldn't instal quite such a sweet little girl as his housekeeper without Mrs. Grundy and Mr. Whalley kicking up a shine. Upon my soul I shall never laugh at special providences after to-day. The only bore is having to go down to this beast of a place. I could have got it over with the governor, and had her all to myself this evening, if things had been different."

But "bore" as it might be, it could not take the radiance out of the young fellow's face, or the answering sunshine from his heart; and more than once he caught himself smiling involuntarily at a stout and jolly-looking couple with two tall, plump, rosy-faced daughters, laden with baskets of ferns and bunches of wild-flowers, and evidently on their return from their summer holiday; while he wondered with a sort of reproachful surprise at the haggard, woe-begone expression of a woman seated exactly opposite to himself in the corner of the carriage, and who, to judge by her face, had not so much as thought of holidays and happiness for many a weary day. The jolly family got out when they had passed half-a-dozen stations, and he was sorry for it, and bestirred himself in assisting the fat mamma on to the platform and handing out numberless shawls, books and baskets after the party, for which attentions he received sundry hearty thanks from the father, and more smiles and blushes from the pretty daughters, as they held out their hands for the scattered *impedimenta* he was collecting for them. But the unhappy-looking woman remained, and by-and-by he found his gaze wandering more

and more from the panorama of green fields and hills and hedges which was rapidly flying past them to the mournful face opposite to him, and wondering what trouble could have graven such deep lines in her face ; or how any trouble in such a happy world as this should be sufficient to stamp out every sign of youth and comeliness as utterly as had been done in the case before him. For she was not old, this woman, not more than thirty perhaps, though the lines on her brow might have doubled that, and left some to spare, if you had judged by them ; and once she must have been pretty—almost beautiful indeed—to judge by the modelling of the brow and chin, the large, deep-blue eyes with their long lashes, and the delicate curve of the lips. Consumption had however laid its deadly hand upon her. The eyes were hollow and framed in brown circles, the cheeks had fallen in and the cheek-bones stood out sharp and prominent ; while the mouth had a drawn, blue look, and the whole complexion—even the redundancy of light-brown hair—had faded to a dull greyish tint, which enhanced the mournful, corpse-like appearance of her whole *physique*. Once or twice Robin fancied he saw the glimmer of

tears in her eyes ; but she never looked at him or spoke ; and at last, with a sort of impatient desire to rouse her, he broke the silence himself. Did she like the window open, or was it too much for her ?

“No, thank you ; I like the air,” she said, and her voice was sweeter than he had expected from the sombre gloom of her visage. He hazarded another observation.

A monotonous country this they were passing through. Did she know when the train would get to York ?

“No.”

Perhaps she was not going so far ?

“Yes.”

He was going farther yet, beyond Scarborough, to stay with friends. Awfully jolly place Scarborough in the summer time. Had she ever been there ?

“No.”

She never looked at him after the first question. Her eyes had fallen on to a broken bit of fern left on the seat by one of the rosy-faced girls ; and they remained there, as though she were too languid or took too little interest in him to lift them again. Robin was getting discouraged, and began to think of

giving up trying to enliven his mournful fellow-passenger as a bad job, when they stopped for a minute or two at a small country station, where a gipsy girl came to the window of their carriage offering little fancy straw baskets for sale. She was a wonderfully pretty little creature, with the peculiar beauty of her class in berry-brown cheeks and saucy black eyes; and Robin bought one of the baskets, saying with a laugh as they went on their way :

"I'm sure I don't know what to do with it; but she'd got such awfully pretty eyes one couldn't refuse, and I don't suppose she sells many of them. What a famous model for a painter she'd make! I should think it would be a more paying profession for her."

"God save her from it and its pay, then!" said his companion, with a sudden bitter energy which made Robin start and look at her.

"Why?" he asked wonderingly.

A light had come into her eyes, and a hectic spot to either thin cheek; her hands clenched themselves tightly on her knee as she answered in the same tone :

"She has done you no harm. Don't wish

her the worst that could befall any woman."

"Is it so bad a trade then?" said Robin gently.

He was beginning to think his strange companion mad; but natural chivalry and the thought of Ellice would have made him tender to any woman just then.

"Bad!" she repeated. "Better to starve and be in hell now than go to it by *that* road."

"Is it necessary to go there at all?" said Robin. He was sure she was mad now; but a poor consumptive woman could have no danger for a strong young fellow like himself; and she interested him by her very contrast to the innocent face he had kissed for the first time only a couple of hours back. "I hope many don't."

"The Bible and most of your parsons say many do," retorted the woman. "It doesn't much matter, though."

"By Jove, doesn't it!" cried Robin. "I should think it did, if I believed in it." The fact was he did not at that moment. How could a man living in the same world as such a little angel as Ellice, feeling the soft clasp

of her hand in his, and knowing that she loved him, realise the existence of any such ghastly after-place? His companion looked at him sorrowfully.

"I believe in it," she said. "I wish I did not. There would be no justice without it; but I don't want justice, I never did . . . except *from* him; not on him—oh no; God knows I never asked for that." She said the last words more as if she were speaking to herself, and so low that Robin could hardly catch them; and he, thinking the topic an unpleasant one, and too exciting for her brain, busied himself in unfolding a newspaper instead of making any reply. It was pleasanter to lean back and, under cover of the page, let his thoughts wander to Ellice, to their next meeting, and how happy they would be in the future, than to be discussing hell and justice with a madwoman. And she had closed her eyes, and did not speak again till more than an hour had elapsed, when she suddenly said, very quietly, and without any of the excitement she had lately manifested :

"I beg your pardon, but you were speaking of artists a little while ago. You are not one yourself, are you?"

"Not at all," said Robin, smiling; "never even handled a brush in my life."

"But perhaps you care about pictures? You go to the Academy. Have you ever noticed any by—by Gerrant, Nino Gerrant?"

"Gerrant? No; that's a foreign name, isn't it? I don't think I ever heard of him. Is he a well-known man?"

She hesitated, the hectic colour coming into her face in a bright glow.

"Not—very, I think. He ought to be, for he paints beautifully sometimes. But there was a small picture of his in this year's Academy. I wonder you did not see it: a woman half unclothed and playing with a tame leopardess, their shadows mingled together on the sunny pavement in front, a wreath of deadly nightshade twining round a pillar to the right."

"A strange subject! but I missed it; for I was not in town at all this summer. Is the artist a friend of yours?"

It was only an idle question; but it drove the colour out of her face in a moment, leaving it so ghastly pale that for an instant he thought she was going to faint.

"A friend?" she repeated huskily. "Oh

no ; but I . . . I knew him once. His real name is not Gerrant. I thought you might perhaps know him, and could tell me where he is now ?”

“Not I,” said Robin. “The only artist I know at all is Frith, and him very slightly. I hate his pictures too ; so that I never know what to say to him. Fancy calling a thing like that ‘Railway-station’ a *picture* at all ! How an age which has produced men like Ruskin and Poynter and Albert Moore can tolerate —Hullo ! is this York ?”

It was York ; and as they forged up to the crowded, noisy platform Robin had to break off his dissertation and open the carriage-door for his companion, who was already rising to her feet. She thanked him with a little bow, and a murmur which might have been anything, and stepping down, walked swiftly away, not looking to the right or left ; but like a woman used to the place, and not expecting to find any one to meet her. In another moment she had passed out of sight.

The rest of Robin’s journey was very monotonous, and the last ten minutes were chiefly occupied in wondering how he should explain to the friends to whom he was going,

that after being engaged to them for a three weeks' visit, he was only going to remain three days ; and that, too, when he had already twice postponed his coming. It had seemed easy enough while he was with Ellice. Men in love are apt to be slightly oblivious of the *convenances*, more especially as regarding their duties to every other member of society but the one being who for the time absorbs their thoughts. But Robin was sufficiently a young man of the world to know that though one or two thorough friends may have sufficient sympathy for love in them to be indulgent to this quasi-selfishness, the generality of acquaintances are not to be put aside and taken up again at pleasure ; and these were people he did not at all care to offend. The difficulty threw a shade of constraint over his meeting with the eldest son of the house, a college chum of his own, who had driven over to Scarborough to meet him, and take him on to his journey's end ; and while they repaired to the Railway Hotel in order to get some refreshment before starting, he almost regretted that he had not told Ellice a week instead of three days. It would be very horrid to be so long away from her : not even hearing from

her, too ; but how could he have the face to tell the Scott-Gardiners that he had come all that way to them, and given them the trouble of keeping his room ready for him, and sending to meet him, only to go off again almost immediately ? And here was his friend rowing him for having put off his arrival for so long, and descanting on the shooting-hut on a friend's estate to which they were going on the morrow, for three or four days' sport, and of all the multifarious engagements to follow.

"There's a capital rink at Scarborough here, and the girls are mad about rinking," said young Scott-Gardiner, who was a brisk, lively fellow, and rattled on so fast that Robin had plenty of time to cogitate the dreadful question of how to say, "But after all your plans I am not going to stay with you beyond Saturday."

"Why *didn't* I tell my darling a week !" he repeated to himself ; and yet the idea of writing to put off his return seemed too disagreeable for entertaining. He had been a good deal spoilt and "made much of," in the course of his three and twenty years, and had fancied himself in love more than once al-

ready ; but at his age men are seldom so *blasé* with women and their fascinations as to be insensible to the pride and pleasure of a pure heart won ; nor was he of that amiable order of young cubs who take such winning for as much a matter of course as the beauty, sweetness or goodness of the girl to whom the heart belongs—things tolerably good in their way, *i.e.* for flinging beneath their own loyal feet ; but by no means to be appreciated at any value of their own, or repaid by any of that foolish reverence, gratitude or worship, which older and wiser men, who have bought their experience in the bitter waters of life, and strained it through the measure of the world's iniquity, will pay with lavish hand and loving heart to anything so rare and good as the love of a gentle, pure-hearted woman. Withal he was an honourable young fellow, and knew that every day he delayed his return was not only a robbery to himself of Ellice's society, but that it was compelling her to maintain a reserve which was neither fair to her nor his family, and which he knew was one of those things which the girl's sensitive nature would feel most keenly. All of a sudden a bright idea flashed upon his

mind like a ray of sunlight ; and while his friend was giving some orders to a waiter about their meal he rushed into the coffee-room, seized pen and paper, and scrawled these lines to his sister :

" Private.

" DEAR MADGE,

" I want particularly to come home on Saturday and can't find an excuse. Telegraph to me that I am urgently wanted at home. I'll tell you why when I come, and don't say anything to the governor——" then after a moment's hesitation he added — " Love to mother and—Ellice, from

" Yours affectionately,

" ROBIN."

One name in the note was blotted before it was placed in the envelope. Perhaps it looked something like its owner; for the young man writing it stooped his head and touched it with his lips. Ah ! well, men in love have done yet more foolish things before now ; and women have not thought the worse of them for it.

Robin felt ever so much better and jollier when his note was safely in the pillar-box,

and positively enjoyed the seven miles' drive to Meresham Hall, being able to join in his friend's fun and talk, and to respond to the welcome he received from the other members of the family with all the greater heartiness for not having to make that horrible speech which had so weighed upon his mind.

"I don't wonder at Tom's liking him. He's such a bright young fellow, and up to anything," Miss Scott-Gardiner said to her sister at retiring that night; and the impression on the rest of the party was the same. How little Robin guessed that, while he was laughing, talking, and singing duets with one of the girls of the house, his own sister, the only one he had, was even then far on her way from the home she was leaving—leaving without tear or sigh—to cast herself upon the shallow faith of a man of whom she knew nothing but that he belonged to a profession which her father held in cordial abhorrence, and that he admired her personal beauty as he did that of any model striking enough to make his pictures sell!

Very early on the following morning, young Herne, with his friend and another man staying in the house, departed for the somewhat dis-

tant moor where their shooting was situated ; and thus when a couple of hours later a telegram arrived at Meresham Hall addressed to "Robin Herne, Esq.," that young gentleman was not there to receive it. Mrs. Scott-Gardiner and her daughters were also out, having gone into Scarborough to spend the day, and thus it remained with a lot of other letters on the hall-table till night-time when they returned.

"A telegram for Mr. Herne? Nothing unpleasant I hope. When did it come?" said the good lady ; and being told between ten and eleven in the morning, she added : "Dear me, how unfortunate he should have left before. Do you think we had better open it, Carrie, and telegraph on contents? It may be something important."

"Or nothing at all. Some people telegraph for such trifles," said Carrie. "Anyhow it is too late to telegraph to-night. I think we had better forward it with the rest of the letters. They will reach them by the first post to-morrow. His people at home are all well, at any rate. He told us so."

And accordingly the telegram, with two letters for young Scott-Gardiner, were put in

an envelope and sent to the village post-office without delay.

Perhaps it did not make much difference after all ; neither telegram nor letters would have found the young men in, they having started with their guns after a six o'clock breakfast, and not returned till evening, when very muddy, tired and hungry, they tramped in just in time for a seven o'clock dinner. They had lunched and rested on the moor in the middle of the day, but had got over a good deal of ground since then, and burnt a good deal of powder, so Tom Gardiner did not even open the envelope which was addressed to him till after dinner and a cigar ; and then the first thing he exclaimed was :

"A telegram, and for you, Herne ! Why, what the deuce possessed the women to put it up with my letters ? I hope it's nothing important."

I'm afraid Robin coloured. Of course he never doubted for one moment that it was in answer to his note ; and inwardly thought Margaret had been rather more prompt than was necessary. She need not have sent it till the following day, at all events ; but after all, it was good of the old girl to be in such

a hurry to obey him ; and he tore it open hastily, wondering how she had worded it.

“Return home at once ; you are urgently wanted there. Do not lose a train after getting this.”

These were the words he read below the superscription (at which, by the way, he never dreamt of pausing to look), and something like a smile would have quivered on his lips if he had not just recollected himself in time and substituted for it a look of anxious gravity, as handing the pink paper to his friend, he said :

“I say, Tom, this looks ugly. What do you make of it ? (By Jove, she’s put it strongly enough ! I didn’t mean her to go it quite so imperatively),” he added to himself with another barely choked down laugh at his little plot. Scott-Gardiner read it with a look of most unfeigned vexation.

“‘*Return home at once.*’ It does look as if something serious was amiss. Is one of them ill, do you think ? But surely it would have said ?”

“They were all well when I left,” said Robin

hypocritically ; " but—but it *is* urgent, isn't it ? I suppose I must go."

" It's the beastliest bore imaginable, but I'm afraid you must. That '*don't lose a train*' looks as if it were something important. You didn't come from home, did you?"

" No," said Robin, colouring a little ; " I've been in Devonshire lately ; but I heard they were all right the day I came down here."

" Who is it from, if I may ask ? and don't they give any reasons for sending for you ?" asked Mallam, the other young man.

" No, none. It's from my sister," said Robin.

" None. It's from his mother," said Scott-Gardiner in the same breath ; and then the two young men looked at each other.

" *Mrs. Herne*," repeated the host, laying his finger on the word he emphasized ; " and that proves she's all right at all events. Did you take it for '*Miss* ?'"

" Yes, let me see," said Robin. In his heart he merely set it down as a mistake of the telegraph clerk ; but it was better that it should seem to come from his mother ; and he read it over again aloud.

" I'm awfully sorry," he said then ; " but I

don't see that one can neglect that sort of thing."

"Certainly not," said Mallam. "Perhaps your governor's been sold up, or the house burnt down, or some of your little peccadilloes—now, Herne, don't blush!—turned up awkwardly. I'd have been in a deuced wax, though, if any one had sent *me* a telegram without saying what was wrong; and anyhow he can't go to-night, Tom."

"No," said the latter, "there's no train from the Horwich station after eight. There's one to-morrow morning at 6.30, if you can catch it, and I'll order the dogcart to be ready to drive you over. I suppose you had better go by that."

Robin made a wry face. After a long, hard day's shooting over bog and heath he did not feel in the best mood for getting up at dawn, swallowing a hasty breakfast (if indeed he got any at all), and racing off to catch the first train for Scarborough, when all the while he knew perfectly well that there was no need for any such proceeding at all, and that he might have gone a couple of hours later, or waited till the day after with equal convenience.

It was his own fault, however, and though

more than half inclined to burst out laughing at his own expense, he knew that as things had gone so far he must keep up the joke to the end, and answered with due gravity :

" Thanks, old fellow, I think I had better."

" You'll have time for breakfast at Scarborough if you're in too great a hurry here," said Mallâm, who was a young man who liked to be certain about his meals, " for you've to wait three quarters of an hour there for the 8.15 to York."

" And again at Waterloo unless you can do the road between King's Cross and there devilish quick," added Scott-Gardiner who was consulting the time-table ; and it seemed to Robin as though the other two were seeing through his hoax and " piling up the agony " for his discomfiture.

" When do I reach London ?" he asked, mentally execrating the unwonted hurry Madge had been in ; and being told 3.20, made a mental resolution to dine and sleep in London and go down to Downshire by the next morning's train.

" I shall be so fagged otherwise, I shan't have go in me to resist the governor if he cuts

up disagreeably about Maid Ellice," he said to himself, using the title his father generally gave to the little damsel in question, and which seemed to Robin peculiarly appropriate to her. "I wonder if she is happy now at knowing that I am coming back so soon, and have gone to all this trouble and given up my shooting and everything for her sake. Well, she's worth it a million times over. God bless her! and I'd do it a million times for one look at her face. What a fool I was to leave her at all!"

He was in very good spirits for the rest of the evening, and joined freely in the other's conversation; so animatedly indeed that Scott-Gardiner wondered if he was really indifferent to his family or only talking fast to cover his excitement.

"You'll let us know if you find bad news waiting you;" he said at bidding his friend good-bye. "I'm awfully sorry we should have to lose you;" and Robin grew red all over and could hardly find more than a mumble in reply, he felt such a humbug for all the solicitude his self-created telegram had excited.

It is a long journey from Scarborough to

Downshire, and he carried out his intention of breaking it in London by going to the Oxford and Cambridge Club to look over the papers and dine, and afterwards to the theatre ; not that he thought there was likely to be anything worth seeing at the dead season of the year, but because every one he knew was out of town, and he wanted something to amuse him till he could see Ellice ; but the play, more deadlily stupid than he had imagined, palled on him, and the longing for the fair little face of his future wife (*his wife !* he said the word over again softly and lingeringly) grew so strong that at the end of the first act he got up and went out. He could think about her more easily in the streets, semi-deserted now, and in the cool evening air than amid the glare and babble of the theatre. It was almost dark ; but the lamps were all alight, and there was a young moon which rising over the houses touched and kissed to silver the fountains in Trafalgar Square, and laid a crisp white finger on the broad pavement encircling that handsomest of all our spaces. He stood there a moment or two gazing from the National Gallery with its heavily-pillared portico and massive flight of

steps all white and shining in the moonlight, to where Northumberland House still stood dark and grim, a monument of grand old times gone by for which no "city improvements" or views of the Embarkment can ever make up, with its stubborn lion standing out with head erect and stiffened tail black as though cut out of ebony against the melodious green-blues of the twilight sky ; but though he looked, he saw and thought of nothing but Ellice. Her image seemed to pervade everything, nay, to be beside him, gazing at him with gently reproachful eyes for having dallied on his journey home when, by putting his comfort a little on one side, and making up his mind to risk a slight amount of chaff from his family for his hasty return, he might have been with her even then ; and so impressed was his brain and heart with the wish that he had done so, and the longing for her, that for the moment he almost thought he *saw* her ! A face like hers it must have been, for as it flashed upon him for a moment from a passing cab he fancied for one quick breath that it was she, and made a hasty dash forward ; and then as the retreating vehicle passed out of the circle of gaslight which had

illuminated the countenance of its occupant, stopped short and laughed to himself at his own folly. Certainly he must be awfully in love to go about dreaming like this, and fancying he saw Ellice in everything ; and after all, now he came to think of it, the face even in that fleeting glimpse had not been quite like hers, but paler and older, with dark sorrowful eyes gazing not at him, but out with a wistful vacancy into the night.

He went back to his club, read till bedtime, and dreamt of Ellice till the sun woke him in the morning.

CHAPTER XI.

I HAVE heard people speak of mistaking death for sleep, and of deluding themselves, for a few happy moments at all events, that one already fled from them for ever and ever into the vast, unknown void of eternity is but resting in that life-giving slumber, without which our life here would be a burden exceeding in torture any yet invented of man; but surely there is *something* in the rigid lineaments of that mask of wax from which the soul has departed, something in the first glance at that eternal immobility of lip and eye and limb which must say at once, even to those inexperienced in the dread signs of death—"The house is empty. He whom you came to seek is gone away;" and you know it, even though you go up to the bed and take the rigid fingers in yours, and kiss the clay-

cold lips with passionate kisses, and try by a thousand caressing words, a flood of tender adjurations, to make-believe to your own heart that this—*thing* which lies before you still holds the soul of him who has already risen and gone away. And so it is with the shadow of a great trouble. The happiness has gone from a place, and we feel it even as we enter at the door. There is a nameless something in the look of the once cheerful rooms, a droop in the garden flowers which used to bloom so bright and sweet, which tells us that the life of gaiety has departed. Something has fled which we came to seek, and we know it even before we realise what it is, and are saddened by it without being aware of our own foreknowledge.

Somewhat of this Robin felt as walking across country from the station he came in sight of Herncroft between ten and eleven in the morning. He had risen early, breakfasted in haste, and left London by the first available train, amusing himself all the journey down by wondering where he should first see Ellice, and whether he should have the good fortune to do so without any lookers-on. Would she be expecting him, and have gone

to the Long Meadow to watch for his coming? or would she be in the garden, weeding and clipping among the flowers? or seated at the parlour window with her head bent over one of those wonderful pieces of embroidery, in and out of which her nimble needle used to fly with such marvellous rapidity, and which he had so often hindered by snatching from her and hanging on the bough of a tree, or the cornice of a high book-case, partly from the sheer delight of teasing, and partly that he might compel her to coax and pray for its restitution? He devoutly hoped that it might be fine weather at the Croft, so that his father might have gone to the fields, and (if it pleased God) taken that once hateful cousin with him, and that Mrs. Herne would be busy in the kitchen, and Margaret—somewhere. Lovers are intensely selfish where the loved one is not concerned, and for the moment Robin would have been glad if his whole family could have been locked up in a cellar underground, if so be he might thus get Ellice to himself for a minute, and be able to take her in his arms and make her tell him that she was glad to have him back.

But though the day was fine, and the sun

shining brightly on the grey stone walls of the old homestead as he approached it, his buoyant spirits began somehow to decline with every nearing step. There was certainly no slender figure leaning over the gate of the Long Meadow; but after all, that he had hardly expected. Ellice was a shy maiden in some respects, and might not choose to come to meet her newly-accepted lover as a girl openly and longer engaged might have done as a matter of course. And there was no black gown visible among the roses and syringa-bushes in the garden, where indeed the leaves had begun to flutter down, and were lying, yellow and untidy-looking, on the lawn where her low cane-chair had been wont to be placed in the hot, still days of summer. The dining-room window and the hall door were both standing wide open, but there was no one in the room and no one in the hall, or even at the windows above, though Margaret, at least, having sent off the telegram, must have been on the watch for him. Could anything *really* have happened? Could Ellice be ill? It was the most groundless of notions, for how often had he not come home from an excursion or college and seen no one till he walked in

upon them ; but all the same, his step grew slower as he came up the gravel walk, and his heart sank down with such a leaden weight, that it was a relief when, at the sound of his foot on the threshold, a servant girl came running from the back premises and uttered an exclamation of pleasure at the sight of him.

"Mr. Robin ! Eh, zur, 'tis well to see thee back. Us has been lookin' an' lookin' out fur thee this long while."

"Why, did you expect me?" said Robin. He had not wished Margaret to make his message public ; but it was just like her stupidity, he said irritably to himself, any other girl would have taken his hint and said nothing. The servant stared.

"Aye, zur ; did the telegraph no reach thee ? Missus telled us as her had sent thee one."

"Yes, I got a telegram" He could not understand the girl at all, she looked so scared and untidy ; and *where* were the rest of the family ? But before he could ask a question or add anything further, other feet came hurrying down the staircase, and his mother threw her arms round his neck.

She was not crying, but at the first sight of her he knew something terrible had happened ; and a great sickness came over his heart as he held her closely to him, which took away his powers of speech, and made her sobbing gasps for breath worse than the worst of news.

“ Robin ! Robin ! ” she said at last. “ Oh, my boy, God be thanked you’ve come at last ! Eh, but I’ve been hearkenin’ an’ hearkenin’ for you till every sound i’ my ears seemed like the step o’ you. Did ye not get my telegram, love, that ye were so long o’ coming ? ”

“ *Your* telegram ? ” repeated Robin, a hot flush coming over his face as he thought of the half day and night wasted in London. “ I got one, but I thought it was from Madge. I wrote to her—did she not tell you ? Mother ! mother dear, what’s the matter ? ” for at the mention of her daughter’s name Mrs. Herne broke out into such bitter, terrible crying as in all her life the placid little woman had never given way to before ; and which shook her plump frame from head to foot. Inexpressibly shocked and alarmed, Robin half-led, half-carried her into the parlour, and holding her in his arms, tried by every coaxing word

to soothe and calm her, asking again and again what had happened. At last it came out.

"Maggie! Oh, Rob boy, Maggie, your sister—she's run away, gone off i' the night wi' a strange man! Eh, think to it! our own child, the only girl we ever had, an' her father so proud o' her, scarce thinkin' a man i' the boundaries good eno' for her. Oh! Maggie, Maggie! what could ha' got thee to disgrace us so!"

"*Margaret run away!*" repeated Robin. He was so utterly startled and taken aback that all thoughts of Ellice, or the reason for his return, had fled from him. He could hardly grasp the meaning of the words he repeated; but he kept his arm round his mother, pressing her head against his breast, and she clung to him sobbing with such piteous sobs, as would have required a hard-hearted man indeed, let alone a son, to hear unmoved.

"Aye, Robbie, run away an' left us—left us to shame herself an' us, wi'out so much as a kiss from the mother who bore her, aye, and suckled her for eleven months: longer than she did for thee, sonny, though folks said as 'twas a folly, for she cut her teeth soon, strong

teeth too, an' I've got the marks o' them in me now. Eh, Lord! what be they, though, to them we'll carry to the grave from her arter this! But she was a stubborn babe then, an' cut them hard, poor wean! an' I couldna' bear to put her from me an' she wail, wailin' all the night. Ah, but many's the time the master has walked the floor a good hour o' nights wi' the poor girlie in his arms when I've been tired out hushin' her. Thee'd not think it o' thy father now, Robbie man, would thee? but eh, there's none, save his wife, could ever know right down to the bottom o' the tender heart o' him. *She* couldn't ha' known, or she'd never ha' left him for a painter fellow as she could scarce ha' spoke wi' half-a-dozen times; an' now I doubt me she'll never see him again, wi'out thee can bring her back to us, Robin. Oh, my boy! why didn't 'ee start directly the telegram came? Nephew Gordon took it for me himself the first thing i' the morning o' Thursday."

"Thursday! But I never got it till Friday evening," cried Robin. "I was away with young Gardiner on a shooting-party, and they forwarded it like a letter. If only it had

reached me on Thursday I should have known it came from you, for I had only written to Margaret the night before, and there wouldn't have been time for her But, mother, I don't understand yet. Try and be calm, there's a dear old mammy, do try. *I'm* with you now at least, and there's Ellice too" (he could not help colouring as he said it), "to love and cheer you; and I'll go and bring back Margaret, even if she's married ten times over, to ask your pardon: see if I don't! But you must tell me more first. I can do nothing until you do. Try and tell me, mammy, for *her* sake."

And thus soothed and adjured, Mrs. Herne told him all that had happened, from what we know already till after the arrival of the boy with the folded paper, which turned out to be a letter scrawled in pencil, from Margaret. It had been given him, he said, by a tall young woman at a distant railway-station, where he had been doing a job for his uncle, a carpenter. He was just finishing up, and his uncle was telling him the nearest way to walk to Merehatch, where he had an order for a larger job on the morrow, when this young woman, who seemed to have been listening to him, came

up and asked if he would care to earn a shilling by leaving a note at Herncroft farm, which was on the direct road to Merehatch, for her. Of course he said he'd be only too glad; and his uncle lent her a pencil and a bit of paper, and she wrote it on a large packing-case, which he thought belonged to her. She had only a few minutes, for the up-train was signalled just then, and a gent, her husband he supposed, came up and hurried her into it. The packing-case was put in the luggage-van, and the train went on. The young woman had hardly time to give him the money and letter before she got into the carriage, her companion was hurrying her so; and she seemed not to wish the latter to see what she was doing. The boy hardly saw her face either; for she had a black veil tied over her hat; but she spoke very hoarse, as if she had a bad cold. And he'd have got to the Croft before, but he lost his way and tumbled into a bog, where he might have stuck all night, only a man heard him shout, came to the rescue, and gave him a dry and some supper in his cottage before letting him go on his journey.

"And what station was it, mother?" said

Robin, his face very pale and grave now that he realised more completely than before how hopelessly lost to them Margaret must be by this time.

"Maxley-Burrows, the next station to Mitcham," said Mrs. Herne weeping; "an' 'twas the London train they were waiting for; but for all that nephew Gordon don't think they went to London, but changed at the Junction for Southampton; an' if so they must ha' meant to go abroad. He telegraphed that from town."

"Oh, he went up to town, did he?" cried Robin, relieved at the thought of having an assistant already in the field; though ready to curse himself for the delay on his part. "And my father? did *he* go to Southampton? Mother dear, don't cry so. I must ask you about it, that I may know what to do; and what made Maxwell think they were not in London?"

"None o' the guards or porters at Waterloo had seen a couple answering to Gordon's description of them," said Mrs. Herne; "an' two did get out at the Junction and change for Southampton. He found *that* out: but — Oh, Robbie lad, I've not told thee the

worst yet ; an' I don't know how I'm to do it, nor bear up under it either."

"Worse *yet*, mother," repeated Robin incredulously. It did not seem to him as if there could be anything worse than his sister leaving her home at night, and in such a way, unless—Where *was* Ellice, by the way ?

"What do you mean ? Nothing more about—Margaret ?" he said. Somehow *her* name would not come.

But Mrs. Herne shook her head, into which the grey seemed to have come all of a sudden, like an autumn frost, making her look like an old woman, instead of the comely, cheery dame who had always seemed almost too young to be her son's mother.

"Nay, nay, not her, but your father. Oh ! Robbie love, he's had a stroke, an' he's lyin' there on his bed now, not able to move ; an' God only knows if he ever will again : he that was *so* strong. Eh ! but the Lord has laid a heavy load on me this day ; not that I'd fret by one word, He knows, if 'twas only me to bear it ; but for *him* to be knocked down, the master ! Robin, Robin, I'm glad thee hast come at last to help us."

"A *stroke* !" said Robin. He spoke almost

in a whisper, holding his mother tighter than ever in his strong young arms. In very truth, this second shock coming on the top of the first seemed too terrible to be true. "When? How did it come on?"

"Just arter reading her letter. He couldna' credit it of her at first; and then he stood up and spoke out terrible like. It was too much for him, poor father! an' he didn't know nor mean one half o' what he said. No man is 'countable at times, you know, if he be over harsh; but Ellice, the silly lass, got frightened, an' Gordon up an' was just going to answer him, when father flung out both his han's, as though to grab him, an' fell crashing forward. I was nearly touching him myself; but he went so heavy, I couldn't stop him; an' he'd have struck his head again' the door-post only Gordon caught him an' laid him on the floor. He's wonderful strong is that lad; he carried your father upstairs arterwards, wi' only one o' the girls to help him; but we all thought he were dead. Aye, till arter the doctor came we did; an' he can't move now, nor speak, save in a mumble like, as I doubt you'd not understand. He's sleepin' now, or was when I

came down ; but he's been mortal anxious for you, Robbie boy."

"Poor father ! if I could only have come sooner !" said Robin remorsefully. "Let me go to him, mother ; and I had better see Margaret's letter, so as to be able to tell him what I think. I suppose Ellice is with him now ?"

"Ellice ?—Oh no," said Mrs. Herne with some embarrassment. "She's not here at all. She's gone on a visit to her aunt, Mrs. Devereux. It was better, for we couldn't do wi' guests just now," she added sadly.

"Gone on a visit—*now* ! Mother, are you joking ?" Robin's face was paling even more than it had done already. Were these horrible surprises never to cease ? He drew back from his mother, grasping her hand instead, and so tightly as almost to hurt her. "You don't mean that she—Ellice—isn't here ?"

"Yes," said Mrs. Herne simply. "Gordon went up to town, but came back for her yesterday. It was the luckiest chance that Mrs. Devereux had written, asking her. Father's seemed quieter like ever since she left. He thinks our poor girl 'll come back to us now."

"But why? I thought he was so fond of Ellice—that you all were! Do you mean that she was *sent* away, or that she wanted to go? What has Margaret's coming back to do with her?" cried the young man, letting go his hold of his mother, and pacing to and fro the room in uncontrollable agitation. Mrs. Herne looked after him piteously.

"I'm feared we made too much o' her, Robbie; an' Maggie felt it. Poor child, she was aye a bit jealous; an' Ellice had taking ways wi' her, wonderful taking ways: least-ways they took wi' me, an' I own it; but how could I tell she would deceive us so?"

"Deceive you!" repeated Robin sternly. He thought she was alluding to Ellice's love for himself; and he stopped short in his walk, the colour flushing to his cheek. "Ellice would never have deceived a lamb, or tried to do so. She could not. What do you mean, mother?"

"Why, it turned out she knew o' Maggie's meetin' wi' this painter fellow, an' took letters between them on the sly. She owned to that hersel', when the master pressed her," said Mrs. Herne, with the quietness of one who believes (as was indeed the case with her) that

she was speaking the simple truth and nothing more. "Father thinks she was minded to get Maggie out o' the way that she might go on wi' her own love affair more smooth like : but, dear heart ! why need she to ha' hid it up at all, when none here were minded to go again' her—wi'out, indeed, brother Harry didn't wish it, for all she said he did. Father told her so right out ; and——but, eh ! what do all that matter when 'tis our own child is in question, an' we not knowin' where she is. Come upstairs to him, Robbie. Come upstairs ; he'll be wakin' an' lookin' for me."

"Wait one moment, mother," said Robin hoarsely. That all this should have happened about his father and Margaret was terrible enough, too terrible indeed for words ; but that Ellice—*his* Ellice—should be mixed up in it, and in the way described, was something different, something even worse in his eyes just then. He could not let it rest so. "If you think Ellice is in love with her cousin you are quite mistaken. I know I once thought so myself ; and I told you of my belief ; but I was wrong, quite wrong. She——"

"She denied it, I suppose?" put in Mrs. Herne quickly. "Lor, dearie, so girls will :

'tis their way ; an' yet when the master spoke to her about him, an' said as we couldn't ask him here wi'out brother Harry approved of her marryin' him, she told us yes, he did ; an' were like a mad girl for glee till he arrived. Maggie hersel'—ah ! my child, my child, where art thou now ?—said she never saw a girl so much in love ; an' 'twas true ; but I doubt she showed it too plain to him, or he was colder by natur'. Anyhow, I do believe they'd a tiff the very day he came, for he took himself off wi' the Squire nigh all the afternoon ; an' she stayed i' the parlour here an' cried. Her eyes were quite red when I found her ; an' they weren't a bit what I call warm to each other when he come back. However, I asked no questions ; for I said to myself, if the lass don't tell me nought o' her own free will, 'tis not me will press her ; an' I suppose they made it up at Hardleigh-mill next day ; for that evening they was as loving as you like ; an' when the master blamed her she up an' clung to Gordon like as if she'd been his wife already, an' he spoke up for her the same. There couldn't be no more hiding it then, though she did say as they'd only settled it that afternoon ; and the Devereuxs can do as they like about it, for——"

"Mother, I am *sure* you are mistaken," cried Robin passionately. His heart was full of bitter pain and confusion, and his voice sounded as if he were choking. Mrs. Herne lifted her hand a little impatiently.

"Maybe, maybe, Robbie. Mothers al'ays are ; but never mind now. 'Tis nought to me or thee ; though I'm right enough for all that, seeing I was here an' saw and heard 'em. God knows I don't want to blame her or wish her aught but well ; but 'tis your father an' Maggie, my own poor, lost girl, I must think on now ; an' don't delay me wi' aught else, lovey ; for my heart do feel to be breakin' for want o' knowin' what has come to her an'—Hush ! Wasn't that Susan callin' ? He's awake. Come to him, Robbie ; come !"

And without pausing for a moment, she turned and hurried upstairs. With one long breath Robin followed her. The world—his world—seemed turned upside down with him ; but she was right, his father and sister were his first duty now, and his first interest. He must attend to them, and them only ; and not to any one else at present. There would be time enough to think of his own feelings afterwards.

It, was well that this was in his mind

before he entered his parents' room or he might have felt a sudden and bitter reproach at the sight of the darkened apartment and of the silent and motionless figure, which had been a hale and hearty man three days back, stretched out, rigid and helpless as any log upon the bed. As it was, he stopped short in the doorway filled with a great awe and grief, and surging over it a quick, youthful remorse for all he had ever done to vex and annoy the old man who had been so good a father to him ; but Mrs. Herne went forward, kneeling down by the bed, and speaking in a voice which, for all the pitiful tremble in it, tried to be loud and cheerful.

"Robbie's come, father dear. He were away when the telegram arrived, an' never got it till yesterday, or he'd ha' been here sooner ; but he's come at once now ; an' don't 'ee fret any more, dearie, for he's only waiting to see you before he goes off to find Maggie an' bring her home."

There was no answer that Robin could hear ; but his mother raised her hand and beckoned to him, and, coming to the bedside, he saw that the Squire's eyes were open and turned upon him. The once ruddy face was of a livid

grey now, and all twisted and distorted, till it looked hardly human in its disfigurement; but long as it was since Robin had kissed his father, not since his childish days, and careless and disrespectful as he might be at ordinary times, he bent down now, pressing his lips on the cold, wrinkled brow, as with one hand on the Squire's, he said gently :

"Yes, father, I've come; and I'll bring her back to you; don't be afraid."

The Squire's lips moved, and a sort of gurgling mutter came from them; but it was only the wife's quick ear that understood and translated :

"You must go at once."

"Yes, father."

"To Southampton."

"Yes, father."

"Find out—about the boats to Havre and Channel Islands."

"Yes, father; I will."

"Have—you seen—" there was a long pause here, and a look of sharp, terrible pain struggling with the old man's resolution, "*her* letter?"

"No, not yet."

"Give it him."

And Mrs. Herne took, with some difficulty, a folded paper from under her husband's pillow and gave it to Robin. Turning a little away from the bed, so as not to see the suffering in his father's eyes, Robin opened it and read :

“ I am writing this to bid you all good-bye, father and mother and everybody. I dare say I shall soon see you again if *he* lets me, and if you're not too angry to let me come ; but if you are I can't help it. I love Nino, the man I am going to marry, better than any one else in the world. I could not live without him now if the whole world tried to make me. And you don't want me. You have Ellice instead. No one here has cared for me since she came, except him ; and he does. It will be better for you to have her than me. She can do all I did at home, and more ; and I have made her lover promise not to marry her yet awhile that you mayn't be left alone. I dare say you think me very wicked, but everybody has always done that ; and, after all, if I've not told you about Nino it was because you were so rude to him—father I mean—and Maid Ellice, as he calls her, has

been just as secret about *her* lover. I shouldn't have gone this way, but she brought me his letter to say *he* was going, and I couldn't let him go alone. I am risking angering him now to write this, lest you should be anxious about me, and I will write again, if he lets me, when we are married; and I hope father will forgive me and not abuse him any more. I'd rather *not* be forgiven than hear him abused. Tell Robin if he turns up his nose at me I don't care; he always did; and good-bye, mother. I'm glad you have Ellice with you. She'll do better for you than I did; and I don't dislike her for it—now.

“MARGARET.”

A strange, hard, passionate letter, strangely like the hard, yet passionate-natured girl who wrote it. Little wonder it had crushed the simple old people, who had been nursing this child as house-cats might nurse a young puma of the desert, in utter ignorance of its nature and propensities, and sent a keen pang of self-reproach through the brother, who, though he might have known her a trifle better, had made light of the knowledge, and given his whole thoughts and attention to that

other, so unlike her ; but he had no time to think of that now, or of the double crash which had come on him and her. His mother was speaking to him in that strange, forced voice, which sounded so infinitely pathetic, for the tears crushed down under it."

"Give it back to father, Robbie dear, he likes to have it in his care;" and then he saw that the old man was trying to make signs for its restitution. In silence he obeyed, his father making an effort to move his head so as to rest it on that part of the pillow covering the letter before, by his wife's aid, he spoke again :

"You will go at once?"

"By the next train, father."

"London or abroad—but London was a blind—they changed—mother will tell you. Go everywhere till you find her ; an' then bid her come home. Wed or not wed, 'tis her home, an' she's a right to come. Be she wed, think you, boy?"

"I should think so ; she speaks of going to be married, but if the man is a blackguard he may have deceived her. By Heavens, if he has," cried Robin with an ominous clenching of his fist, which made his mother start and

shiver, "he shall pay for it and do her justice, or I'll know why! Be sure of that, father."

The dull eyes of the old Squire brightened.

"God bless you. He may ha' been honest that way, an' only feared to ask her o' me; but—anyhow, bring her; wife or outcast, she's our girl still: *ours* and no other. Tell her that."

"Yes, father; I will," said Robin hoarsely, a lump he could not control gathering in his throat.

"An' tell her the other wench is gone to her own folk. There'll be none to vex or say a harsh word to her. She should not ha' misdoubted us; but let that be. She'll learn wiser now. 'T'as broke my heart, but—she knew not what she did. Go now. That will do."

"*Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do!*" The words came back to Robin's mind and took away any answer he might have made. He felt very far from forgiveness himself as he stooped and kissed the helpless wrinkled hand he had held before leaving the room.

His mother came out after him, crying again (though more softly now) the moment she

was outside the door ; but she could only stay long enough to add her messages of forgiveness and entreaties for the runaway's return, urging Robin to impress on her the state her father was in, and the fact that as yet her flight had been kept secret from all but one old servant, who had been years enough with them to willingly aid in guarding it, and a story made up that she had been kept at a friend's house the night of her father's stroke, and that, in consequence of it being judged better to keep him quite quiet, Ellice had been sent to join her and keep her from returning till he was better.

"If she'll only come back, Robbie, so it be but for a while, to see him, an' for the honour o' the name he cares so much for, we'll manage somehow so as it can be kep' quiet : an' no one will say a word again' the man she's married. Oh ! Robbie, don't say a word. If you make me think he's not been honest wi' my poor child, you'll kill me dead ; an' oh ! if you see him, be patient wi' him, for her sake," Mrs. Herne said, weeping bitterly ; and, having obtained a hasty promise, which, in the indignant state of Robin's feelings, had little chance of fulfilment, she went back to her husband's

side, her round, sweet-natured face so wan and puckered, that it was all her son could do not to curse aloud those who had brought such a change upon it.

And then, after a hasty harnessing of grey Bessie in the dogcart, and a hastier meal, for he had had nothing to eat since seven that morning, Robin was off again, travelling—not as yesterday, in joyous mood and high spirits, to meet and clasp to his arms the fair young girl who had promised (God knew whether lightly or falsely !) to be his wife—but to seek a sister who had fled from her home, to see that the man who had taken her away did her justice, if he had not done so before ; and to bring her back to receive her pardon from the parents she had deserted.

CHAPTER XII.

“BEEN there, but left for Paris.”

It was the same information, altered only in the last word, which after a long day's wandering to and fro in Southampton he had gathered there, and which had sent him on to Havre. Now it was to start him off again. “Paris!” So they had fled to the world's gay capital, had they? Little chance there of finding unaided, a tall, good-looking artist and a swarthy-complexioned girl, with black eyes and hair, among the scores of artists and hundreds of swarthy, black-eyed women collected within the city of the Seine; but then on the other hand there were the Paris detectives of whose matchless powers he had so often read, to help him; and surely Margaret would come across the *Times* or *Galig-nani*, and see the advertisement which at

Mrs. Herne's request Gordon had inserted in the former paper, and which Robin had ordered to be copied into its French contemporary in the hope that it might catch her eye.

It did catch others. There were people living in London, fathers of growing girls, too, who taking up the *Times* at breakfast read aloud, with a laugh, the simple message,

"Dear Madgie, come back. No one angry. Poor father struck down and calling for you. Don't delay for *his* sake:" and commented on it thus:

"Sick one gets of this sort of thing! They read so touchingly, and one knows all the time that they're either thieves' warnings, or some love intrigue with the word 'father' thrown in for a blind. Bless you, my dear, didn't you know that? Why ninety out of a hundred are nothing else. This is a thieves' letter. I can tell it by the wording."

And there were people in Merehatch and the neighbourhood, who, despite the anxious care of the Hernes to keep Margaret's flight secret and shield her name from reproach, understood only too well the full meaning of that brief paragraph, and piecing it

together with the scraps of gossip and rumour already flying about the district, damned the unfortunate girl with that unshaded blackness which can only be made blacker when those who impart it are not only neighbours but kinsfolk.

But to the Hernes the great object was that Margaret should see, and seeing, understand it; and bitter as were Robin's feelings at present towards his cousin Gordon Maxwell, he could not but be glad that the latter's thoughtfulness and promptitude had paved the way to his own after-researches. Poor Robin! things generally were very hard with him just now; and when he took his seat in the railway-carriage for Paris, you would hardly have known him for the sunny-faced young fellow who had sat opposite to the haggard-looking woman on the way to York. Like his mother he seemed to have grown older all of a sudden, with a worn, tightened look about the mouth, and more than one newly-graven line across his brow; and an utter absence of all his natural trimness and foppery, merged now in the dusty, shabby seediness of a man who has been travelling night and day without any

proper rest or food ; and with no other ending to his journey, even if successful, than one of such pain, humiliation, and embarrassment as forty-eight hours before he would never have dreaded as likely to come within reach of any one reared under the peaceful shadow of the Croft.

Ellice had warned him not to make scorn of the quiet and simplicity of his childhood's home. Would to Heaven that he had profited earlier by her rebuke and had not encouraged in Margaret the spirit of restlessness, which, in the more passionate nature of the girl, had dashed her headlong to her ruin !

And Ellice herself, what of her ? Was it true, this that he had heard ? and had he indeed lost her just as he thought her won ? Or rather, had he never really won her at all ; but had been made the victim of a passing quarrel between her and her lover, the decoy-duck to bring back a wandering bird to this fair lady's net ? the prize by the capture of which she had consoled herself for some wound inflicted on her own heart by him to whom she had given it, but which she had abandoned with as little regret as compunction at the

first gleam of penitence in the offending one ? If it were so, no man had ever been so shamefully treated as he, who a few hours gone had hardly been able to dissemble his joy and triumph before strangers' eyes, and had woven plots, and counted the hours till he could get back to the little grey-eyed girl with the crocus-coloured hair whom he had found crying by the river-side ; and who had turned the steady current of his blood to a stream of life and fire by the confession that she loved him. Loved *him* ! But had she said so after all ? It had been the lowest of low whispers, that spoken in his arms with her apple-blossom face hidden against his breast, and often as he had asked the jealous question again, in his greediness to hear it repeated, he had himself stopped its being uttered by sealing the lips with kisses before they had parted into the word he craved.

Was she deceiving him the whole time ?

A day or two back he would have struck to the ground any man who had dared to hint so foul a slander against the truth and purity of the girl he loved ; but then a few hours back he would have boasted of his father as the halest and strongest man of his age in all

Downshire; and would have ridiculed the idea of Margaret having a lover, and a lover unknown to her parents, as one too absurdly far-fetched to be even listened to with gravity. Now, all was changed, and amid the general shattering of his home-bulwarks what was to show that Ellice stood any firmer than the rest? The old family ship had struck on a rock and gone down all of a sudden without word or warning. If she had been true would she not have stuck by the wounded skipper and his shattered vessel to the last, instead of deserting both to seek safety and happiness in her cousin's boat?

But suppose she had *not* gone willingly? Suppose they had driven her forth in their unjust anger? That question too came to him in a whisper of mingled hope and pain. That the Hernes were anxious to have her gone so as to pave the way more smoothly for Margaret's return, Robin had felt with a mingled pain and resentment which all his tenderness for his parents, all his bitterness and jealousy against his absent love, was hardly able to smother; for whatever she might have done to *him*, however lightly she might have played with his affections and

trampled on his love, he never for one moment dreamt of giving credit to the insinuation that she had known of Margaret's intrigue, and aided it for her own advantage. *She!* Why, his face grew hot all over, that any one belonging to him should have ever harboured such a suspicion. Strangers, people thrown among deceitful and scheming women might judge of others by those they knew, and think as coolly as they pleased; but for himself, he who had seen the innocence and sweetness of the girl's spirit manifested in the thousand little unfoldings of domestic life, would have thought it blasphemy even to discuss the possibility of such treachery on her part with others; and an insult to herself to tell her that he put no faith in it.

"Believe me, mother, you are utterly wrong with regard to Ellice," he had said, even in the sorrowful hurry of departure; but Mrs. Herne only answered:

"La, Robbie, what's thy head running on Ellice for? She's happy enough, an' none hurting her. Do 'ee think o' Madge, love, *our* Madgie. 'Tis her is in question; not any other girl!"

With regard to his own treatment, how-

ever, it was different ; and here he had to palliate her conduct by imaginary extenuations so as to make it comprehensible, or even credible, in his eyes. She had always been very candid about her love for Gordon, so candid that he had lost all hopes of winning her for himself, till he came across her that day at Hardleigh End ; but what after all if it were a love unconscious of its own nature, and unsolidified by avowal or engagement ? She had owned to him that she was crying because Gordon was going to be a priest, and would not let her come to live with him as his housekeeper ; and his heart had so leapt up at the words that, forgetting everything else in his joy, he had prevented a further explanation by the avowal of his love ; but was the simple desire to be housekeeper to a clerical cousin sufficient cause for that little white face and swollen eyes, unless, indeed, the former were loved with more than the love of cousin or sister either ? *She* might not know it (in his loyalty and tenderness he was anxious to repeat that excuse for her), but how was he to tell what had happened after he had left her ? Suppose the whole idea of young Maxwell becoming a priest

had originated in some little quarrel between the cousins, and that she had accepted him (Robin) out of pique, might not the very fact of her having done the latter (if Gordon found it out), have brought about an understanding and reconciliation between her and her real lover in which he had been forgotten as entirely as if he had never existed? Well, there was not much excuse for her even in this way of looking at it. Surely, if it were true, she would in common honesty have written to him; and indeed as it was he felt sorely hurt that she had not done so. He did not even know her address; but she must be well aware of his; for he had telegraphed to her cousin about the unhappy business which was taking him away, giving his address both at Southampton and Paris; and besides, how easily it would have been for her to write to him at the Croft; or to have left a note for him there. She must have known how strange and cruel her departure would seem to him. If she cared for him at all would she not have wished to explain it?

With all his shame and anger and anxiety about his sister, poor Robin could not

keep his private trouble so completely out of his mind but that it recurred to him every few minutes like an unbidden ghost; and assuredly if there had been any one in the carriage who knew him they would hardly have recognised the merry and *debonair* young Oxonian of a few days back in the jaded and haggard-looking traveller of to-day.

There was one, though he did not know it. He had been alone at first, but afterwards a woman had got in at one of the principal stations *en route* for Paris and seated herself in the opposite corner to him. She was dressed in black and had on one of those gauze veils with a deep hem which so effectually conceal the face; but she might as well not have worn it; for though Robin mechanically put out his hand to help her in, he never thought of looking at her, or of questioning who she might be, but remained absorbed in his own gloomy musings till, when they had nearly arrived at their journey's end, he was startled to the recollection that he had a fellow-traveller by her abruptly addressing him.

"It isn't so long since we were journeying together in an opposite direction; but *you* seem

to find now that life is hardly more pleasant than I found it then."

Robin stared at her. He had been so completely wrapped up in his own thoughts that any one speaking to him just then would have startled him ; but there was something in the words combined with the quasi-familiarity of tone which bewildered him for a moment. Then a sudden light of recognition flashed into his eyes. She had thrown back her veil ; and as his glance travelled from her wavy nut-brown hair to the anxious emaciated face beneath, he exclaimed :

"I have seen you before ! Yes, I remember we travelled to York together. You—" the colour flushed into his cheek and he made a sudden movement as if to spring from his seat. "Good God ! you are the very woman who asked me about *him*."

"Him ! Whom ?" she asked, surprised in her turn now and shrinking a little back as if sorry she had spoken ; but Robin was thoroughly roused by this time.

"A man, I had never heard of then," he said bitterly, "of whom I wish to Heaven I had never heard now. Gerrant, an artist. Do you know where he is at present ?"

"Yes," she said calmly; though there was a nervous flutter about her lips; "he is at Paris."

"At Paris? I know that already; but where?" he was so much excited by this unlooked-for meeting, and the chance it seemed to afford him, that he forgot all *convenances* and almost common courtesy in his abrupt rejoinder. The woman recalled him to himself.

"Why do you want to know?" she said quietly; but with a searching glance which somewhat embarrassed her questioner. He met it frankly, however, and answered:

"Because, as it happens, I am going to see him at present; and it is very important that I should find him with the least possible delay."

"You have urgent business with him then?"

"The most urgent possible."

"And yet you had never heard of him four days ago."

"Nor he of me," said Robin with a sudden savage clenching of his right fist. "He mayn't have done that even yet, but——" he stopped with an involuntary gasp of anger, "it is a pleasure to come for him."

"You speak as if you had some quarrel with him. Do you mind—I might be able to help you—telling me what it is?"

"I *have* a quarrel with him," said Robin sternly, "but it is not one I care to speak of. If you can tell me where to find him I shall be immensely obliged, and you will be helping not only me but—others very considerably."

"Others beside you? You are not a lawyer's clerk travelling in your master's interests? You told me you were at Oxford. Is it about anything in the way of money matters that you are at difference with him?"

"Nothing whatever," said Robin rather shortly; he was annoyed at her coolness and persistency. "And I have nothing to do with the law as yet. I shall have though if the man chooses to avoid me."

"How?"

"I shall set a private detective on his track. Do you want to warn him? You may if you like, for it might save time. We shall meet anyhow."

"You want to meet him then, yourself?"

"I *mean* to do so—the hound!" said

Robin, the last words muttered between his teeth. His companion looked at him curiously, a little nervous furrow in her brow.

"You have a great animosity against Mr. Gerrant," she said slowly. "You can hardly, however, expect me to gratify it, I who know him, unless I also know the reason for it. For aught you can tell he may be a friend of mine."

"If he is, I am sorry for you ; but I don't want you to hurt him. I can do that for myself if I see cause. Since you know him, though, you might at least tell me if he is likely to deal honestly by any one thrown into his power," said Robin, hesitating and growing very red ; "any young person, ignorant of the world. You are a woman, it is not me or any man I want you to help ; but a woman like yourself, only younger and more helpless."

Poor Robin ! it was like the bitterness of death to put these inquiries with regard to his own sister ; but Providence seemed to have thrown a clue to her recovery in his path ; and he dared not answer to his mother if he let it go. The effect of his appeal was, however, greater than he expected. His strange companion started to her feet, her

hands pressed together and her colour coming and going from scarlet to deadly whiteness with startling rapidity.

"A young woman!" she repeated hoarsely, "It's the old story, then!" The train swayed from side to side, and she tottered, falling half on her knees, half in a sitting position at Robin's feet. "For pity's sake tell me—is your quarrel with him about this woman? Is—is she with him now?"

She was ten years older than Robin at least, and terribly in earnest. Even as she spoke, a long, exhausting fit of coughing came on, and he saw to his dismay that the handkerchief she pressed against her mouth, grew dark with crimson stains. Compassion got the better of pride in the young man's heart, and he tried to raise and calm her; but she resisted, grasping his knee for support and reiterating her question until he answered her in one word:

"Yes."

"My God! and *you*—you are in love with her too?" she said. A ghastly change had come over her face, and the question was hardly audible. Before he could even answer it her hand relaxed, and she fell forward in a

fainting fit, her face upon the floor of the carriage.

Almost at the same moment the train, which by its irregular movements had shown signs of coming to the end of its journey, stopped with a great heave and jerk ; and Robin knew by the crowd and bustle on the platform outside, the shout of porters, rumble of wheels and mighty *hiss* of escaping steam, that they had arrived at Paris.

He lifted her on to a seat and jumped out without delay to get assistance and see about a fiacre for her. He had common sense enough left not to care to be found alone in the carriage with a fainting woman ; and it would have been too brutal for the most hard-hearted of men, which Robin certainly was not, to go his way and leave her to herself. By the time, however, that he returned she had partially recovered, sufficiently so at any rate to stand with the aid of his arm and to express her desire to be driven to an hotel (a very poor one in a shabby quarter) as quickly as possible.

" I am very ill," she said feebly. " I must rest—rest and sleep before I can exert myself any more," and then she rather

avoided Robin's eye and leant on the porter who was supporting her; but the former felt as if the clue he had nearly gained were slipping from him, and followed her so closely that when she was placed in the fiacre she could not, if she had wished, avoid speaking to him. Her face was still ghastly pale, but as he pressed up to the door she turned to him and said hurriedly :

"Thank you, and good-bye. You did not answer my question; but I will answer yours all the same. Take this girl away from him, whoever she is, as speedily as you can; and God help you! He *cannot* deal honestly by her if he would; and unless he is wonderfully changed, he would not if he could."

"But his address—confound him! Only give me his address, and I'll manage the rest," cried Robin frantically and almost gasping for breath. The driver was already whipping his horse, and the woman had sunk back in the seat as if exhausted. As Robin hung on to the door in his eagerness she lifted her head, shaking it with a mournful dreariness in her sunken eyes:

"I do not know myself. I am trying to

find out. Have I not been looking for him for weeks?"

"Then you can't help me! How did you——"

But the cab had driven on. In another moment it was out of sight.

CHAPTER XIII.

FOR how many seconds Robin stood there where he had been left he could not have told. He was so bewildered by what seemed the cruelty of leading him on to tell so much of his own affairs, and then mocking his hopes at the end by not even giving him a scrap of the return information he so much needed, that he remained staring after the fast vanishing fiacre as if turned into stone ; but with a heart full of such anger and bitterness as no rigid-featured Memnon ever owned, until suddenly recalled to a sense of his whereabouts by a smart rap on the shoulder.

A man was standing beside him, a young man too, though several years older than himself, taller and larger made altogether, with a slouch hat covering his crisp, bronzed curls, and no shirt-collar to break the line between

his purple flannel-shirt and full, powerful throat: a man in a desperate hurry or agitation of some sort; for his sun-tanned, handsome face was pale and his lips working as if with some sudden excitement.

"Pardon, m'sieur," he said, hardly waiting for Robin to turn his head, and speaking in French, though not sufficiently well for the latter, had he known much of the language, to mistake him for a native, "excuse my hurry; but my train is just going. You were speaking to a lady just now, whom I think I know. Would you have the kindness to tell me if her name is Scott?"

"*Le nom de la dame? Je n'entends pas—quoi—vous—*" began Robin, bungling frightfully between his English offence at what he considered a liberty in a stranger, and that charming inability to speak any modern language besides his own, so characteristic of our University-taught young men.

The stranger interrupted him impatiently:

"The devil! you're English? I thought so, but I wasn't sure. So am I, and please excuse me; but I saw you putting a lady into a cab whom I thought I recognised: an old friend of mine in fact, whom I've not seen for

ever so long. Can you tell me her name, that I may see if I was right?"

"No, I can't," said Robin shortly. There was something about this man which irritated him to an almost unreasonable degree, and he showed it in his manner. "The—the lady," he had never somehow called her so in his own mind; though her dress, shabby as it was, might have belonged to one; and he hesitated involuntarily at the word, "may be a friend of yours or not. I know nothing about her, except that she travelled in the same train with me."

"And you didn't even hear where she was going? Devil take it! then I'm afraid I can't hunt her up," cried the stranger with a persistency which Robin's huffiness in no way abashed. But before the latter had time to reply, even in the way of "setting down" his interlocutor, there was a shout from the train just starting:

"Holloa! Gerrant! Nino! hi there! You'll be left behind. Jump in, old man."

A second tall young fellow, also slouch-hatted and collarless, was standing just within one of the carriages, holding the door open. Robin caught sight of a bundle of sketching

paraphernalia on the seat of the carriage, and whirled sharply round on his heel, but the train was moving; there was no time to speak, or even collect his thoughts, for at his friend's shout the individual who had been parleying with him had already dashed across the platform; and before Robin realised that he was gone, was already blocking up the door of the carriage from which his brother artist had been beckoning to him. How it happened that Robin followed in haste as desperate, and missing that carriage, sprang into another, the door of which was still open, landing while the train was positively gliding on, and amid a volley of ejaculations, remonstrances, and curses from the people and railway officials collected on the platform, he did not know himself, and never stayed to inquire. All he knew was that by-and-by he found himself breathless, gasping, and ticketless, in a first-class compartment of a train, bound he knew not where, except that it was *from* the city which a few minutes back he had been in such hot haste to reach; and therefore presumably taking him away from the sister of whom he was in search. It was not indeed for some seconds after he had begun to ask himself was

he mad, or what had seized him to carry him so completely out of himself and his right way, that the answer came to him. He had heard the name of the identical man he was seeking, the man for whose whereabouts he had been inquiring so short a time before; and it was addressed to the free-and-easy stranger with the sun-burnt face and semi-civilised attire whose inquiries he had been trying to shake off, that he might get away the quicker on his own business.

God in heaven! could it be *he* indeed?

Had Providence sent this villain who had stolen away his sister, the strolling artist who had for aught he knew made her name a by-word and a mockery in the quiet country place where her ancestors had lived and died in peace and honour for so many centuries, to cross his very path, as if unwilling to leave him to the tardier vengeance of pursuit and inquiry? If it were so, of a surety he would never scoff at special mercies again, or doubt the interposition of an overruling providence in human affairs. Only God working with him could have led this man into his hand. The thing now was not to let him escape from it.

Fields still yellow with harvest, tall poplars stretching away in long monotonous rows, hedges white with dust, a pale blue sky, against which the white sails of frequent windmills showed like kites revolving in the breeze, now and then a cabaret with the sign of three red wine-bottles displayed in an azure ground; all the flat, same, yet pleasant country outside Paris went flying past him as he sat watching grimly at the window of his carriage for the first place where they were to stop, and he be enabled to get out and confront his enemy.

It came at last, a very short "at last" in reality; but it seemed long to the young man watching and waiting at the window, like a terrier at a rat's hole; and then the train stopped at a little white-painted country station, and Robin was out of his prison in a moment and hastening to the carriage (three in advance he thought, but he was not sure) where his enemy had been confined. He was saved the trouble, however, of finding it; for almost as quick as himself the latter had sprung out, and was just taking a knapsack and small portable easel from his friend's hands when young Herne caught sight of

them. He did not hesitate a moment ; but walked straight up to his late interlocutor and said :

"Mr. Gerrant, I believe ? I wish to have a few words with you if you will allow me."

"With me ?" said Gerrant coolly enough, but staring. "Oh, certainly ; though I don't know who you are——Stay, though, haven't I seen you before ?"

"You spoke to me on the Paris platform twenty minutes ago," replied Robin, chafing between the necessity for restraint before the third man and his wrath at Gerrant's *sang-froid*.

"Did I ? Of course I did ; but I took you for a stranger to me then ; though, now I think of it, there's something quite familiar in your voice. Very stupid of me, I'm sure, to forget you."

"As you never saw me before, you could hardly remember me," said Robin shortly. "I'll tell you who I am, however, quick enough, if you'll come off the platform. I want to speak to you in private."

"I am not fond of speaking in private with people I don't know," said Gerrant, hesitating and glancing towards his friend.

Robin interrupted him fiercely. He was fast losing the little self-command he had ; and with it any hopes he might have had of overawing the other.

"Whether you're fond of it or not, I'm afraid you'll have to do it at present ; so you may just as well not delay. Are you coming with me?"

"If I am, you may be sure it's at my own will, not yours, young sir," said Gerrant. He had begun to suspect something now ; and his manner had changed to one half insolent, half sullen. "You may be a pickpocket for aught I know. However, it's quite a matter of indifference to me ; for I don't think I've much to lose to-day ; and if I had I don't think"—glancing at Robin's smaller size and make with vast contempt—"that *you'd* get it without I let you. If you want to speak to me you'd better do it civilly, that's all."

He was following Robin's lead as he spoke ; and, after a short delay at the barrier caused by the latter's want of a ticket, they turned into a narrow lane bordered by a high hedge on one side, and shut off from view of the station by two or three sheds and a clump of poplars. Here, after they had gone about a

hundred yards, Gerrant stopped and said abruptly :

“ Well, what do you want? We are private enough here.”

“ Want !” cried Robin, his eyes flashing as he turned impetuously upon him. “ When you know my name you won’t need to ask me that. Mr. Gerrant, I am Robert Herne of Herncroft. Now, sir, where is my sister ?”

“ *Your sister !*” repeated Gerrant. He was prepared for the announcement, and kept his self-command capitally, not a muscle of his face moving from the mask of contemptuous surprise in which he had set it. “ Excuse my repeating your words, my dear Mr. Hernery Herncroft, or whatever your name is, but you must own they sound somewhat extraordinary. What the devil should *I* know about your sister ?”

“ You took her away with you—from her home,” cried Robin, almost choking in the righteous wrath which yet placed him at such an immeasurable disadvantage, “ a girl of nineteen !—No one but a thorough black-guard would have done such a thing. Where is she ?”

“ You are certainly a civil young gentle-

man, Mr. Henlofts," said Gerrant mockingly, though the colour rose in his dark cheek. "Have a care that I don't refuse to answer language which none but a blackguard would use. I've told you already I neither know, nor want to know, anything of your sister. Indeed, judging from the present specimen of the family, I should say a man would rather leave than take them, which, if you've finished, I'll do with you at present."

But Robin laid a hand on his arm, and it was not so easy.

"Not so fast, Mr. Gerrant ; I don't care a bit what you say to me, so your insolence is wasted. Do you mean to deny that Miss Herne left her home with you on Thursday night and is with you now? That is my question, and if you don't call that taking her away—" cried the young fellow indignantly. "But there! I don't mean to argue with you. I've asked you a plain question. Will you answer it?"

"Most certainly. No young lady left, or was taken from her home by me," returned Gerrant coolly. "If any one, or half-a-dozen for that matter, called on me in my apartments" (emphasising his words with a vicious

sneer), "or, happening to travel in the same train with me, entrusted themselves to my protection *en route*, that is quite another question, and one which concerns the young persons themselves, and no one else."

"I beg your pardon, sir, it concerns their relations and you," retorted Robin. "Yes, even though you are coward and dastard enough to shelter yourself behind a girl's skirts by an insinuation which no one in their senses would believe for one moment, and which no man, scamp though he might be, with one grain of manliness in him would dare to utter. *My* sister Margaret run away with you, or any man, except by your persuasion and contrivance! A likely story that! I tell you what, you mean, dirty hound," his voice quivering and his hands clenching with passion, "I thought badly enough of you before, so badly that but for her sake, and for not caring to make a worse scandal of her folly and imprudence, poor child, than has been made already, I would have followed you, not to speak to you as I'm doing now, but to give you such a thrashing as would have taught you what gentlemen think when men like you steal into their households, and

entrap their innocent sisters into runaway marriages; but—— Eh! what?" as a swift, brutal change of expression on Gerrant's face made him spring forward, the hot blood rushing back upon his heart till his very lips were blanched. "Do you mean to say that she is *not* married to you, that——"

"Hold off!" said Gerrant fiercely, though there was a derisive smile on his lips as he warded with a slight raising of his powerful arm the younger man's clutch upon his shoulder. "I'm pretty patient, and can make allowances for you because you're a little fellow and excited; but keep your hands off me, or—Margaret's brother though you may be—I'll knock you into the middle of next week."

"*Will* you answer my question?" cried Robin, pressing on him and utterly unheeding.

"The devil take you and your questions! Which do you mean?"

"Are you married to her?"

"Neither to her, nor any one else."

"Then, by Heaven! you shall be, scoundrel as you are, and even though I shall take her home with me directly afterwards, and never let her look in your cowardly face again. My sister's name shall never be dragged in the

dirt by such as you. Do you hear me, Mr. Gerrant?"

Gerrant looked at him with a sneer which turned the coarse beauty of his features to something diabolical.

"Yes, I hear you. A charming programme; but doesn't it strike you that *she* may have something to say to the second part of it, and I"—the sneer settling into a defiant frown—"to the first?"

It flashed across Robin's mind then, from something in the man's tone, perhaps, that it might have been better for poor lost Margaret and the old people at home if by any means he could have kept his temper till he had seen her, and learnt from herself what he had to avenge. It was too late for prudence now, however, and he answered as hotly as before :

"What you have to say doesn't matter, only you'd better say nothing about *her*. You seem to have forgotten that she had a brother to protect her, but by ——, you shall remember it when I find out how much you have to account to me for."

"Find out what you choose," said Gerrant doggedly, but as he spoke he instinctively lifted his arm as if to ward off the anger he

was provoking ; " only if you think I am to be bullied into marriage with any man's sister, be she who she may, you're mistaken. I have no inclination for matrimony at present."

" You say that to me, knowing that if her flight gets abroad she will be ruined for ever with all respectable people," said Robin hoarsely. His mood had changed all of a sudden, and he did not spring forward as his antagonist expected. On the contrary, his face was very pale, and he spoke in a lower and more restrained voice than before.

" To you or any one," retorted Gerrant.

" And knowing too that it was only her utter innocence of evil and ignorance of the world that enabled you, who must be a dozen years her senior, to lead her into the imprudence which, unless you do her justice, must be the ruin of her life."

" I don't want to say anything against your sister," said Gerrant, " though I deny that I led her away in any sense. Ask her yourself if you doubt me, and if you can find her."

" I mean to do so—when I have settled with you. Before I do that, be so kind as to give me her address."

" Sorry to disoblige you again, but I'm

afraid I must," said Gerrant coolly, and a little put off his guard by Robin's quietness. "I never give a young lady's address till I know whether it will be pleasing to herself. Excuse me if I rather doubt it in the present instance. And now," with a slight laugh and gesture of leave-taking, "I think our business is pretty well concluded for the present. If you want me you can find me. I shall be at the Variétés this evening, and—— D—— it! What are you doing?"

For he had been too easy in his conclusions, and when in the act of turning on his heel was jerked back by a hand on his collar, which, strong man as he was, swung him round before he had time to resist.

"You *devil*!" said Robin between his clenched teeth. "Do you think you're going to escape so easily? You can shoot, I suppose; and you shall have a chance of doing so. There is my address," flinging his card on to the grass at Gerrant's feet. "But wait a bit first," as the latter made a struggle to free himself. "I've not done with you yet."

"Let me go, you fool!" stammered Gerrant, scarlet with fury. "Do you *want* me to hurt you? Let me go, I say."

“Not till you’ve had one of the soundest thrashings you ever had in your cowardly life. I’m going to give it you,” retorted Robin holding on, and raising the cane he carried. It fell once, with a sharp, stinging cut across Gerrant’s cheek, raising a long, red blister as it did so; once and once only. Before it could be lifted again, there was a short, sharp struggle; a dead, crashing sound, like a log of wood felled heavily to the ground; and one man was lying face downwards in the muddy lane, with the blood flowing from his nose and mouth, and soaking into the earth in a dark red stream, while the other was walking rapidly away in the direction of the station.

“He *would* have it, the young idiot!” said Gerrant to himself. “The idea of a lad of his size trying to tackle *me*! I wonder how soon he’ll come to. He went down like a stone. Well, I can’t help it; I dare say some one will come to his assistance, though it looked a lonely bit of a path, too, and as if people didn’t often go by it. By Jove! he’d have been rather astounded if I had let out that I know no more where the girl is than he does. I’d give something if I did. Who-

ever would have dreamt of her escaping me this way?"

He had come in sight of the station and his friend, who was lingering about waiting for him. They exchanged a few words together; not altogether pleasant ones, for the friend noticed the mark of the stick across his face, and Gerrant was not pleased thereby. Apparently, however, he thought better of provoking a second quarrel, for it turned off in a laugh, and he proceeded to give an explanation which both amused his companion and redounded pleasantly to his own credit. They walked on into the woods; but did no sketching, and returned to Paris an hour later from another station than the one they had got out at.

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How long Robin lay on the damp, grassy soil of the lane he never knew. It had been a bright, sunny afternoon when he arrived at Paris; but when his senses came back to him, it was to feel the small, cold prick of fast-falling rain on his uncovered face; and the first effort to rise made him so sick and giddy, that for more than an hour he lay turned over on his back gazing stupidly with

half-closed eyes at the rain pattering down on his up-turned face, and wondering with a dim, hazy wonder, what it was which had brought him there, and why his head should feel as heavy as a ten-pound shot, and his mouth, moustache and hair be clogged with something which turned his fingers red to touch. He had had a fall, but how? And every time that a gleam of recollection came back to him and made him start and try to struggle to his feet, the same deadly faintness swept over him again, and he fell back, swooning away into a sort of half-stupor, more painful than actual insensibility.

Some one did, however, come by at last; a country-woman carrying a basket of live fowls on her back; and who, finding a young Englishman lying on the grass half-conscious, and with his face covered with blood, first raised a great outcry, after the manner of her sex, and then flung down her fowls and ran off, still screaming, to the station for assistance; returning therefrom before many minutes had passed with two porters and a bottle of brandy. The last item was the most useful. Robin had no sooner swallowed a mouthful than he sat up; and the second

gulp steadied him so that he was able to stand up, wipe his face and declare that he was all right. He had had a fall and cut his mouth, an accident, he said, but it was nothing to speak of; and he was only anxious to know what had become of the other Englishmen, the two artists who had arrived by the same train as himself.

The porters shook their heads. They knew nothing about the gentlemen in question. Artists often came from Paris to paint in the little wood at the back there, returning at sundown to the city. Seeing that it was already dusk and raining, they had probably done so by now. Was m'sieur going back to Paris too? There would not be a train for five and twenty minutes from now, and would not m'sieur like to pass the time by washing his hands and face, and taking some rest and refreshment to restore him? *Parbleu!* his lips seemed cut through; and there was a lump *gros comme un œuf* on his forehead. Assuredly it was a villanous accident that had arrived to m'sieur! Robin understood the innuendo, but made no reply to it. For Margaret's sake — poor imprudent Margaret! — he would try at any price to keep

his quarrel with Gerrant and its cause from getting into the papers ; and indeed, now that he thought over what had happened, he could almost have cursed his folly for attempting to wrestle with a man twice his own size, and when to add to the odds against himself he was worn out with travelling, and weak from want of rest and food. It was indeed the effect of the latter want which had helped in all probability to keep him so long insensible ; and even now he felt sufficiently giddy and shattered to be glad to take the civil Frenchman's advice, and try by a hasty meal and copious cold water bathings to make himself a little more fit for his return journey to Paris. He had promised to write or telegraph to his parents from there ; but what news had he to send them which would not be more painful than silence ? He had been helped wonderfully in his search ; for not only had he met a woman who knew Gerrant, but had stumbled on the very man himself ; and all to what end ? Why, he did not even know the latter's address ; nor that of Margaret. All that he had learnt was that she was not married ; and his very heart turned sick, and the blood rushed into his scarred

face as he recalled the brutal sneer which had answered his appeal for justice to the misguided girl, and thought of that darkened room at home, and the mother watching beside her husband's bed for the child who had deserted them.

It was past seven when he arrived in Paris, and he went straight to the hotel, the address of which he had given Gerrant, and asked if any gentleman or other person had been there to inquire for him. None had ; and shaken as he felt, he changed his dress and went off to the Variétés on the chance of seeing him. Gerrant was not there, however. His own face was marked in too tell-tale a fashion for him to like to show it in public places even if he had cared to meet Robin again ; and after waiting and looking about in all parts of the house for over an hour, young Herne took his sick and aching head home, and went to bed thoroughly exhausted. On the following day he was unable to move, and the hotel people sent for a doctor who pronounced it a slight concussion of the brain, and ordered him to keep quiet for a day or two ; whereupon he sent for a detective that he might employ him to hunt out Margaret if she were

still in town, and sent a messenger with a note to the hotel where the unknown woman had been driven. In less than an hour the note was brought back to him with the intimation that the woman had only slept the night there and left that morning, where for they did not know ; and after that he had nothing to do but lie still and wait, not much cheered by a note entreating for news from his mother, and a telegram from Gordon to say that he was keeping a watch on Ger-rant's London lodgings, and that the latter was still away from them and his address unknown. There was no word from Ellice and no mention of her in her cousin's message; and now it began to dawn on Robin's mind that even supposing young Maxwell were not in love with her, nor she with him, he might object to his cousin and adopted sister being connected with a family so irretrievably disgraced as the Hernes could not fail to be by Margaret's flight ; and that Ellice shared in his opinions and was anxious to show as much by her silence. She was very pure minded and very proud, he knew, with a great shrinking from anything unwomanly or unbecoming in her sex ; and he was Mar-

garet's brother and could not disassociate himself, or be disassociated, from his unhappy sister. In his suffering and unhappiness he had been on the point of writing to her at her cousin's address, and asking her why she had left his parents and himself so cruelly ; but if this were the reason he could not in common manliness or delicacy force himself upon her. To find Margaret and take her home was his work, and he must think of nothing else. Poor girl ! if she knew one half of the misery caused by her thoughtless and wrong-headed step, surely she would have repented, even if she had not done so before, of having suffered passion to lead her into it ; but perhaps she knew nothing, and thought herself cast off by her family and her very name tabooed !

It was easy for the doctor to order Robin to keep quiet ; but it was not so easy for the young man to obey the injunction.

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